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THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA



Abraham Mitrie Rihbany

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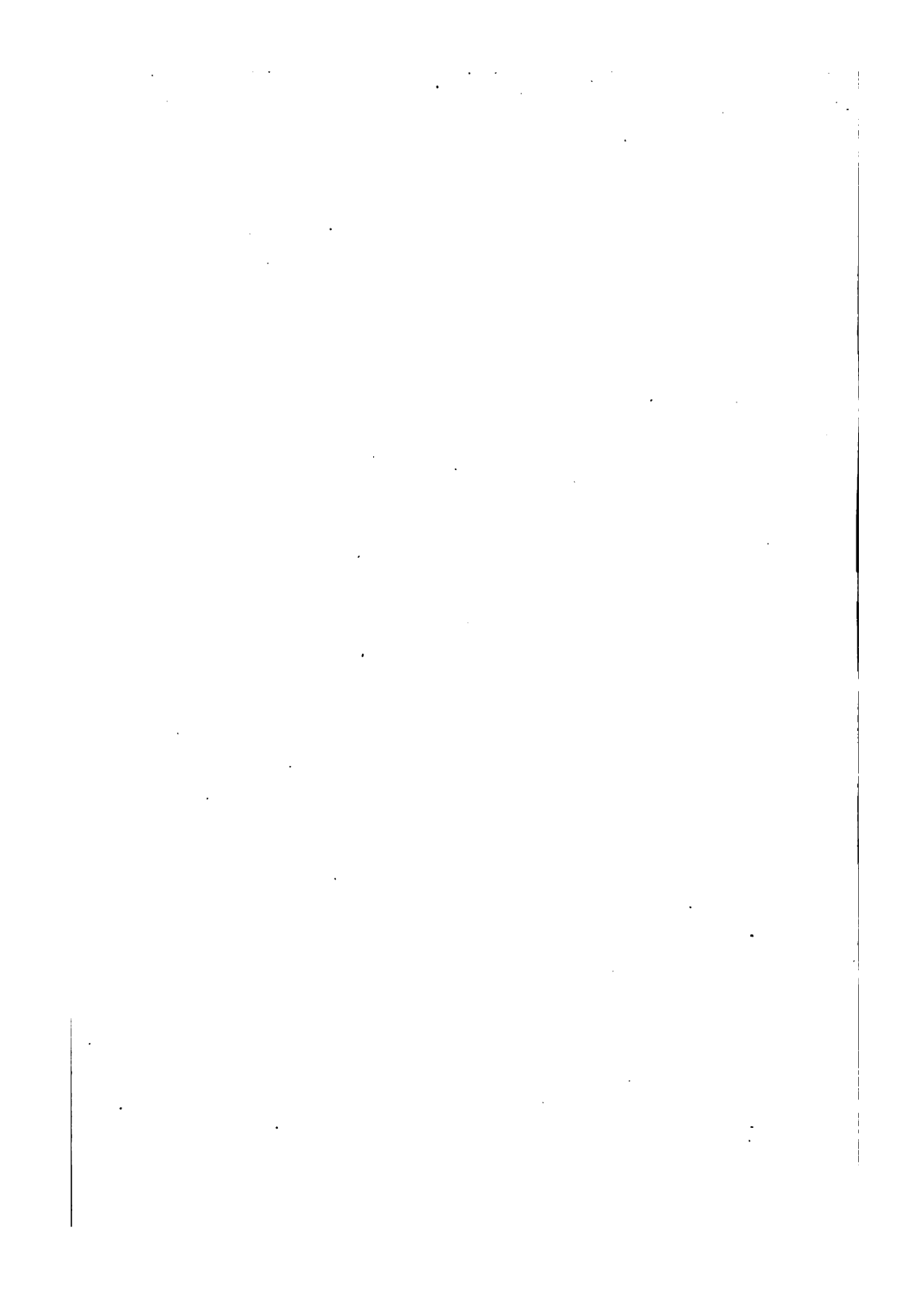
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THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

The diagram illustrates the experimental setup. A participant is seated at a table, looking at a screen. On the screen, a 3D model of a hand holding a tool is shown. A coordinate system (x, y, z) is overlaid on the model. A scale bar is also present. The participant is instructed to observe the hand and tool, and to adjust the tool's position and orientation to match the target position and orientation.



At the close of that day Abu-Nasif, Abu-Rostum, and I found ourselves standing around the hole (page 66)

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THE
HIDDEN TREASURE
of **RASMOLĀ** -
by Abraham Mitrie Rihbany -



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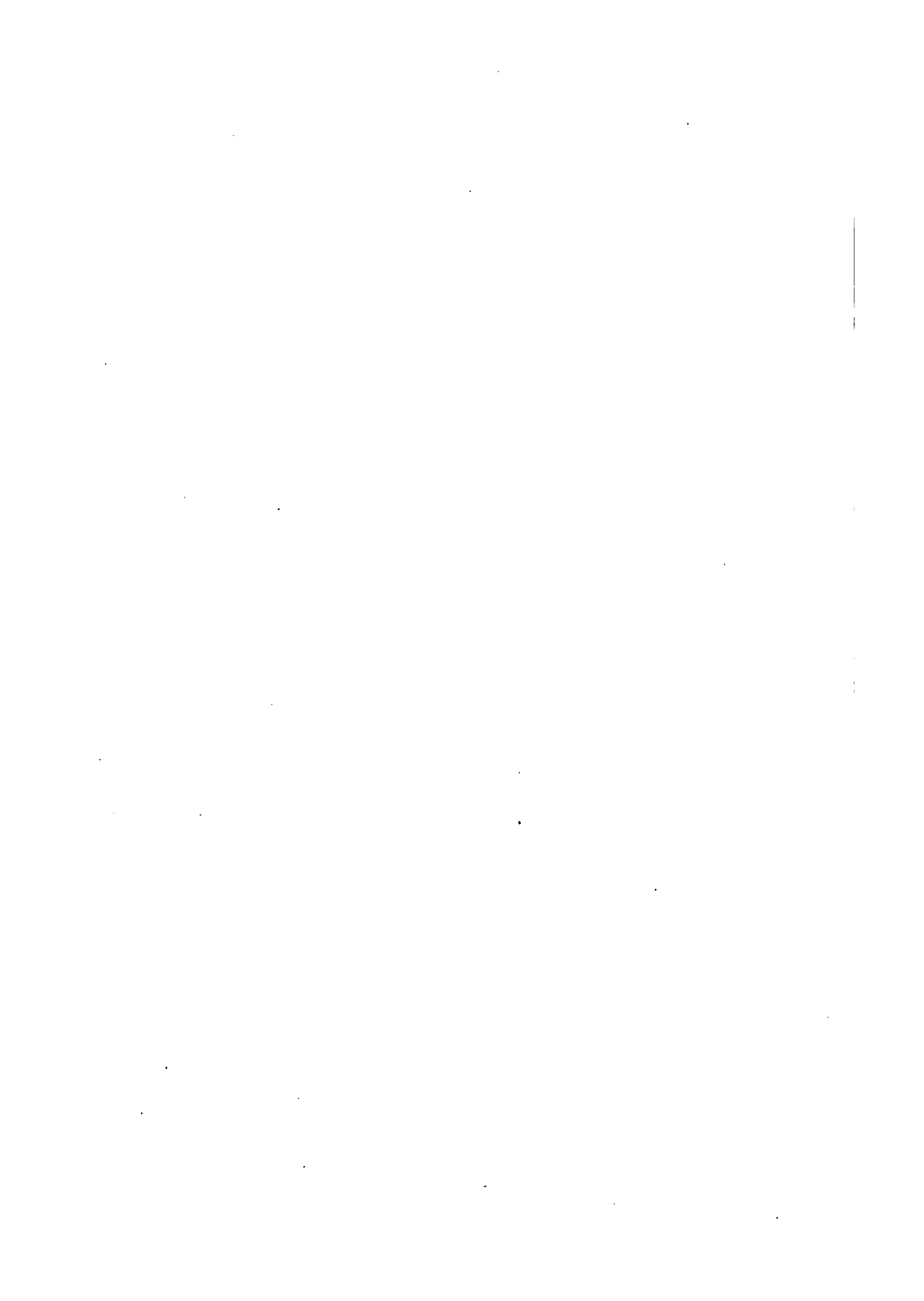
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TO
MARGUERITE AND EDWARD



PREFACE

A few years ago I published in the *Atlantic Monthly* an account of this adventure. The limitation of space in the magazine made necessary the omission of many details, which have been added to that account in the story as now told. As was mentioned in the *Atlantic* at the time, this is a true story and a personal experience of mine. So far as memory can be trusted, I have recorded the events which attended the digging for the treasure substantially as they occurred. My telling and retelling of this story for so many years before its publication kept it as fresh in my memory as if its scenes had been enacted but a short time ago.

The character of this adventure made it possible for me to introduce my readers to such regions of Oriental psychology and life as I had no occasion to traverse in my former books, and

PREFACE

which in reality constitute the essential value of the present publication. The scenes here portrayed are not only real phases of the life of the common people of Syria, among whom I was born and brought up, but were in one way or another actually connected with our activities in the secret and dread enterprise. They have been reproduced in this work with only such dramatization as every writer knows is necessary to raise such a piece of literature, as far as possible, from the sphere of mere photography.

I have deemed it necessary also to give its participants, excepting Faris, other than the names given in the earlier account.

Finally, I offer this story to the reading public as the fullest known commentary on the parable of the "treasure hid in a field" (Matt. 13:44), and I ardently hope that our life-quest may be the wealth recommended in that parable, and not mere silver and gold.

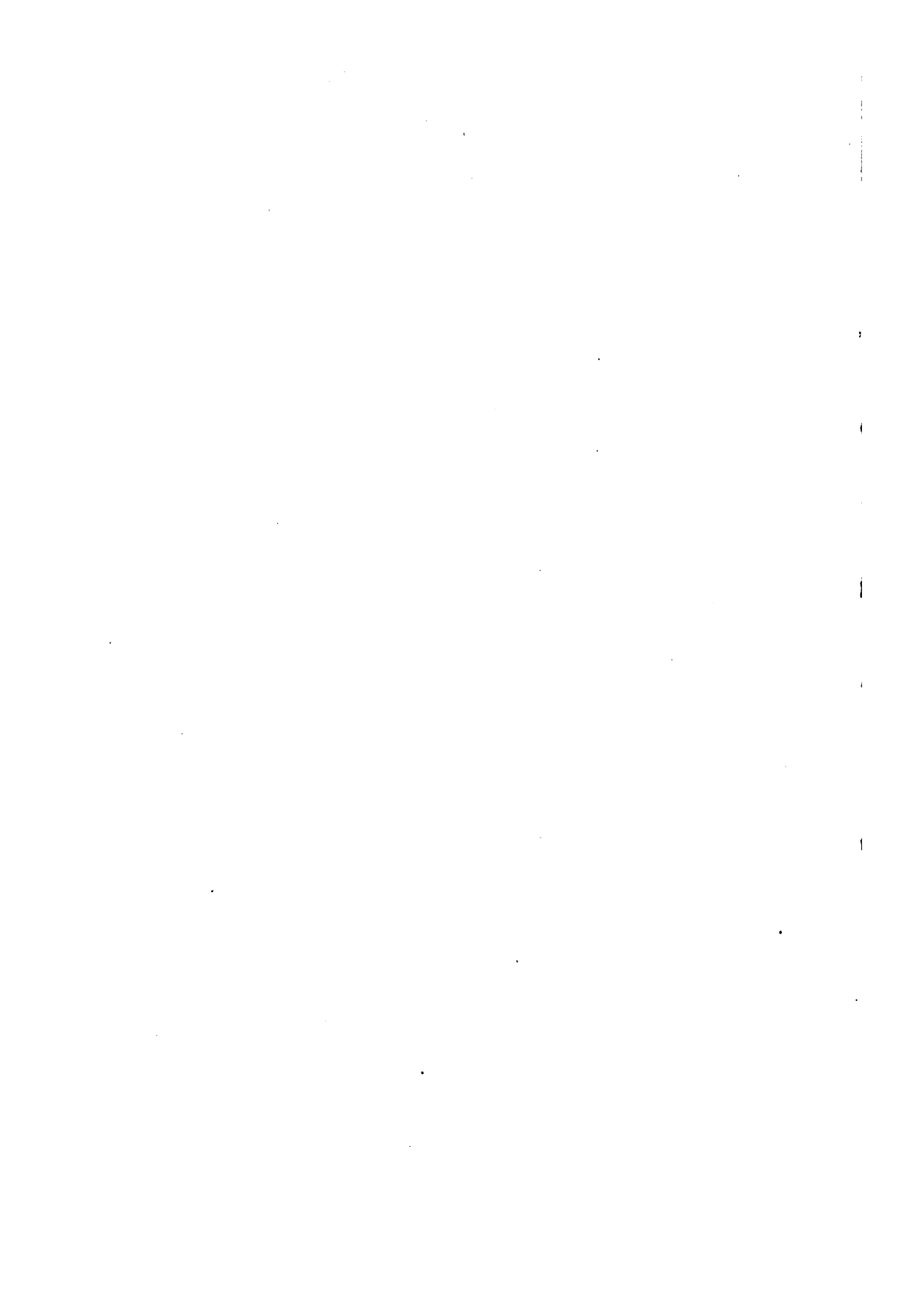
A. M. R.

Boston, Massachusetts.

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*The frontispiece and decorations are from drawings
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THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

• •

CHAPTER I THE MESSENGER

I do not remember whose Saint it was, but it was one of our Greek Orthodox Church holidays when Abu-Nasif's messenger arrived at our house. His coming was unexpected, but not entirely unsuspected. A short time before this man, whose mission ultimately meant so much to me,

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had stood at our door, a cousin of mine, who was just convalescing from an every-third-day fever, had said that his right ear was "ringing" violently. It rang, he stated apprehensively, three times at short and equal intervals.

"*Kheir in sha' Allah*" (that is, may it be good by the will of God), said my paternal grandmother; "some stranger is coming to this house to-day."

"Were those rings in your ears sharp and distinct?" she thoughtfully inquired of my cousin, "or such hissings as fever usually makes?"

"Sharp and clear," answered Ferid, "like the ringing of a little bell." Apparently fearing to have suspicion cast upon the prophetic significance of the music of his right ear, Ferid added with a rigid gesture of his index finger, "It is like I used to hear before I had the fever; that is, like what happens before a strange visitor appears."

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At this juncture our aged and good neighbor and friend, Yusuf, who was a never-failing visitor at our house on holidays, when cakes and confections and wine were much in evidence, contributed his Daniehic interpretation of the mysterious actions of Ferid's right ear. His voluntary contribution was not new, but it was very timely.

"Ferid, my son," said Yusuf tenderly, and after a rather superficial but urgently necessary clearing of his throat, "this kind of ear-ringing is a sure sign that a stranger is about to come and bring important tidings. But in all my long life I have never known such tidings — do you hear me, my beloved? — I never knew such tidings to be bad unless a crow should fly over the house and neighborhood at about the time the ear rings."

"That is very truth," said my grandmother with great relief and satisfaction; "the accursed

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crow always brings sad reports; that is why he is condemned to be black always. That is why he never returned to Noah's Ark, while the dove did."

"*Haik, haik*" (so, so), said Yusuf; "the crow is an evil bird. Not only his color, but his voice also shows that God has cursed him. I remember that ill-omened day when our most valiant man, the hero, the great fighter, Ibrahim Saad, was killed while on his way to Damascus."

"He was coming back from Damascus," said Yusuf's wife by way of benevolently assisting the memory of her aged husband. "He was coming back with two muleteers and a sheep merchant when a band of highwaymen came upon them and — woe to us! — killed Ibrahim, after he had felled two of them."

"What is the difference between going to Damascus and coming back from Damascus?" inquired Yusuf, with a slight rise of temperature

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in his temper. "Ibrahim was killed on that evil day; and the next day, shortly before the terrible news reached this town, early in the morning, I saw an accursed crow flying right over Ibrahim's house, and crying, Ghak, ghak! May God curse the black things!" concluded Yusuf as he thrice crossed himself in self-defense against all evil influences.

Here my mother, whose humor often freed her from subjection to such mysterious forebodings, and who felt that a holiday was not the most fitting time for extended necrological reminiscences, came to the rescue.

"Has any one seen a crow?" she inquired. "Leah," she asked Yusuf's wife, with a suppressed laugh, "have you seen anything?"

"Not a thing, thank God," answered the good matron.

"Have a fried cake, Yusuf," spoke again my mother, "and we will watch for a crow. Get him

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a glass of wine," she said to me; "he is a good prophet."

"You are always light-hearted," said my grandmother to her daughter-in-law, as she checked momentarily the whirling of her spindle, which knew no holiday rest. "I hope to God that no black thing will appear in the sky."

No black thing appeared, but Asaad, Abu-Nasif's messenger from Rasmola, did. Quite undesignedly, Asaad arrived shortly before the noon meal.

"O good dwellers of this house!" called Asaad as he reached our open door, which call is the equivalent of ringing the doorbell in the mechanical Western world.

"*Ahlan wa sahlan*" (most welcome), answered my father, as he stood up to meet the stranger. "Be good enough and come in."

Removing his shoes from his feet, just outside the threshold, and resting his staff against the

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doorpost, Asaad walked in with profuse salaams and prolonged and solicitous inquiries about the health and happiness of our family.

“In the keeping of God, we are all well,” answered my father. “It is a blessing to have you under our roof; your presence makes our holiday doubly sacred and thrice happy.”

The messenger sought to sit in a lowly place near the door, whereupon my father took him by the arm and said, “No, that is impossible; come up higher,” and led him to a place near him on the red soft cushion. Apparently Abu-Nasif’s messenger was a well-bred Syrian, one of those respectable common people of whom God has made so many. After a brief but very polite remonstrance that the place offered him was above his deserts, he came “up higher” with dignified freedom and sat erect next to my father, with his legs folded under him and his palms resting upon his knees.

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"What is your precious name?" asked my father.

"The name of your humble servant," replied the messenger, "is Asaad ben Mansûr, of the town of Rasmola."

"*Wa na'm!*" (all honor!) exclaimed my father.

"I have come to your hospitable abode from Abu-Nasif Haddad, a kinsman of mine, and a very respectable householder of our town, with a message pertaining to an important business. Abu-Nasif's business is —"

"I beg you," interrupted my father, "let no business at this moment intrude upon our pleasure in your visit. This is a holiday and our dinner is about ready. Let us drink together a glass of wine in honor of the day and of your presence, and after that we will hear of your mission."

"No, no," protested Asaad; "I well know that your hospitality is boundless and known to all men. But, by the sacredness of this holy day, I

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am in no need of food, nor have I come to test your generosity which is well proved. But an hour ago I rested myself at the fountain near the junction of the footpath and the mule road and there ate my *zad*" (food for the way). "Therefore permit me, I pray you, to make my mission known and to return speedily in order that I may reach Rasmola before the falling of the darkness."

All this was very polite, but it was not true. In every country a certain measure of social lying and polite and harmless hypocrisy, which the etiquette of certain occasions calls for, are deemed excusable. In Syria such social graces attain a more luxurious growth than they do in America, and so long as the game is known to all it really matters little how much a person may deem it necessary, for the sake of politeness, to depart from the truth and cleave to its opposite.

We were still in the dry season during which the common people of Syria do their cooking out

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of doors. Our summer cooking-place was close by the north side of the house and near the foot of the rough stone steps which led to the housetop. A small door at that end of the house facilitated the communications between the "storeroom" (*makhzen*) and the open-air cooking-place. Our house consisted of two rooms, the storeroom and the large living-room, which served also as bedroom and dining-room. At the time the messenger arrived, the savory odors of the cooking floating into the house gave the welcome indication that our holiday dinner was about ready, and awakened certain feelings which, I have every reason to believe, made even our politely prevaricating guest feel that any discussion of business would under the circumstances be an exasperating impertinence.

At the beckoning of my beloved mother, I went into the storeroom and brought out the large, round dining-table and placed it near

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where my father and Asaad were sitting. The table was made by our town carpenter, of ordinary pine boards, planed and nicely fitted together, and was about eighteen inches in height. As a rule the common people of Syria use neither table covers nor napkins nor knives and forks. In case of liquid food, spoons are used; otherwise the food is lifted into the mouth with small "shreds" of thin bread. So my task in "setting the table" was very easy. I simply brought it from the storeroom and set it on the floor of the living-room. Also out of the large jar of our home-made wine, I filled a small gourd holding about two quarts, and placed it with our drinking-glass next to my father, who was of course the master of the feast.

Our dinner consisted of two principal dishes highly esteemed by the Syrian people, *kibby* and *mahshy*. *Kibby* consists of lean meat and of crushed wheat (which is previously boiled and

HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

thoroughly dried in the sun) beaten together into a pulp in a stone mortar, properly seasoned, and either eaten raw (I beg the pardon of bacteriologists) or made into cakes and broiled. *Mahshy* consists of small summer squash, about the size of bananas, which are hollowed into thin shells and stuffed with rice mixed with an equal quantity of finely cut mutton, seasoned according to taste, and boiled with tomatoes. And while dessert is never regularly served with meals in Syria, on this occasion my mother had made for us a dish of wheat-starch blanc-mange liberally sprinkled over with delicious pine nuts. A large number of thin loaves of Syrian bread, folded once and placed under the table, completed the elements of the feast, and we encircled the festal board, sitting on the floor with our legs folded under us.

Again for good manners' sake, our guest repeated his dinner-at-the-fountain story, and that

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he was really unable to eat. However, the overwhelming entreaties of our whole family spoken in a chorus, and no doubt an inward necessity, accentuated by the sight of what was before him on the table, quickly silenced his feigned protests. He moved himself into proper range and began to eat with us with polite avidity. At proper intervals my father poured the wine and also as a generous host urged our guest to eat by remarking to him that he was not really eating as well as we were. My mother also apologized a few times for the scantiness of the dinner we had been able to put before him and begged his pardon. Our guest, however, knew what he was doing, and met the polite remarks with ones of a similar character.

When it became perfectly convenient to do so, Asaad drew himself back from the table, made the sign of the cross as he thanked God, wiped his luxurious black mustache with the thumb

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elevation of his palm, and said, as he turned his head first to my father, then to my mother:

“May God perpetuate your hospitable home; may we eat again at this table at the marriage feast of your dear son [meaning me]. I have had a great abundance.”

No amount of urging would make Asaad eat more.

The table having been removed, I placed before our guest the tobacco plate and package of cigarette-paper, and passed the cups of Turkish coffee.

“Now, master,” spoke Asaad to my father, “I will first present to you Abu-Nasif’s letter and then will speak further of my mission.”

Abu-Nasif’s letter was folded in the form of a triangle and sealed with a bit of bread moistened in the mouth of the man who sealed it. I was the only member of our family at that time who could read and write, although my accomplish-

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ments in that line were not of classical dignity. I always dreaded being asked to read a letter, and much more to answer one. My father took the letter from the messenger's hand, and after expressing his deep regret, as he always did on such occasions, that he never had the privilege of learning how to read, he handed the letter to me and asked me to read it "slowly and clearly." To read slowly was no trouble at all for me, but to read clearly was an entirely different matter. In this case, however, with Asaad's promptings, who, although himself an illiterate, seemed to know much of the contents of the letter by heart, I succeeded in making out "clearly" what the important message meant.

Translation often robs a document of much of its original charms. All I can say here is that I have spared no effort to reproduce, in this strange English tongue, and in an environment not entirely conducive to the production of such

HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

literature, the Oriental poetical and spiritual charms of Abu-Nasif's letter to my father.

Here is the letter:

"From Rasmola, in September 2, Western Calendar ¹

"[Sent] To the presence of the highly honored (*muhtarem*) Mitrie Rihbany; may his life be prolonged.

"First we present you with our high esteem and greatest regard, and ask of the bounty of the eternal God the preservation of your own precious life and the lives of all those within your home, the which may God perpetuate. We ask also of the Highest to compass you about by his many and rich gifts and guarantee to you the safety of your beloved offspring and bless

¹ Abu-Nasif was an adherent of the Western Church, therefore used the Western calendar. We were of the Eastern, or Greek Orthodox Church, and went by the Eastern calendar which ran then twelve days behind the Western calendar. The difference now is thirteen days.

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them with the blessings of perfect health and strength. We implore also the High God to prosper you in all your undertakings and greatly to multiply to you the fruits of the labors of your hands.

“If you condescend to ask about us, we will say that by the grace of the Highest we are enjoying the blessing of perfect health and vigor. Our dear ones and all those within our home are by His grace well and happy. The only thing we lack, and the loss of which we keenly feel, is the sight of your bright countenance.

“After all this (*amma ba'd*) we petition you to know that we are fully aware of your far-famed genius and ability as a master-builder, which are sung even by wayfarers everywhere, and that you are sought from far and near by all those who would have houses firmly and elegantly built. The High God has endowed you with wisdom and thus enabled you to build on sure

HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

foundations. So we thank him abundantly for his gifts which are for the benefit of man.

“The first intention of your humble correspondent was to seek you in person and gladden our eyes by seeing you face to face. But to our great misfortune we have not been permitted to have that gladness (*surour*). Therefore we are sending to your honored presence our messenger and kinsman, the carrier of this our letter. Our purpose in this communication is to state to your respected person that by the will and help of God, we intend to build a house according to our requirement and our means. So if He will permit us, we wish to have the house completed before the occurrence of the winter season.

“Our deepest desire is to secure your eminent ability to construct the house for us according to your skill and wisdom which are known to all men. Other builders are numerous, but we are seeking the master of them all. The sea is far

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greater than all the creeks. Should you desire more information our messenger and kinsman, the carrier of these words, will supply the same by word of mouth. However, with your exceeding understanding, we are confident that no further explanation will be needed. We implore the High God again to move your heart and cause you to send us the joy-giving word of your consent to be the builder of our house, which we should consider of the richest gifts of life.

“Finally all our family and those about us join in repeating to you our abundant greetings and the petition to Him on High to guard and preserve you and your precious family, and greatly prolong your days.

“Your petitioner (*da'aikum*)

“ABU-NASIF HADDAD”

During the reading of the letter, Asaad's face beamed continually. I thought his admiring

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smiles were for me, but they were not. When I finished reading, he turned to my father and said, "This beauteous (*jameel*) letter was written last night by Abu-Nasif's nephew, who is a student in a school in Beirût. He is a marvel with the pen, and his face is as bright as the full moon. The house was full of people and many of them dictated sentences, but the young man put it all in becoming order." Then turning to me compassionately he added, "I have no doubt that if you went to school, you could write such a letter too; may God prosper your growth."

"I have nothing but profound gratitude for Abu-Nasif's good words," said my father to Asaad. "We are known to one another, and I wish so much that I could respond to his call in person, but I have so many jobs on my hands already."

"By the Saint of this holiday," exclaimed Asaad, "don't say that! I must take *you* with me. I will carry you on my back."

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The means of transportation Asaad offered my father did not prove compelling enough to alter the issue. It was impossible for him to undertake the task in person.

"Would Abu-Nasif accept other men I might send to him if I guaranteed their fitness for the purpose?" asked my father.

"To tell you the truth," answered Asaad, "he would as a last resort, but he told me to insist and *insist* upon securing you yourself."

"You need have no fear," said my father, smiling and pressing Asaad's hand; "I will send two competent masons, my son and a cousin of mine whom I expect to arrive in two or three days. By the way, where does Abu-Nasif expect to build? I am familiar with Rasmola."

"At the southern edge of the town," was the answer, "near the Convent of Saint Elias. Abu-Nasif owns a vineyard there. It is a lonely place, but he is fond of it."

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"It is lonely there."

"Yes; and last spring a ghost was seen in the locality, but my kinsman wants to live on that parcel of ground. There are traces of old buildings there, buildings of ancient days, and nobody knows what there is underground."

The "ghost" and the mysterious possibilities "underground" greatly excited my curiosity. Yet little did I dream at that moment of the most strange experiences which that building job at Rasmola held in store for me. I only wished, and wished very ardently, that my father would carry out his plans and put me in charge of the proposed enterprise.

"Did you say," inquired my grandmother with some apprehension, "that there was a ghost where you are going to build?"

"One was seen there last spring," replied Asaad. "Some people going by in the night saw one sitting on the rock, but it did not harm any of them."

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"My misery!" exclaimed my grandmother; "how are we going to send our son to where the *djinniat* [female *djinn*] are? May God curse them, they will bewitch his mind! He is the dearest of the dear, and we don't want to expose him to such things, building or no building."

"Asaad only heard that," said my father with perfect calmness. "It may have been only fancy. I have worked in hundreds of places, some of them very lonely, and I never was attacked by a ghost."

"But are we sure that our boy will be safe?" asked the good woman again.

Here Asaad appeared to suffer from remorse for having mentioned the ghost. The voluntary statement concerning the dread spirit threatened to upset all our plans. He felt that he was in danger of returning to Rasmola empty-handed, all because he had made an uncalled-for statement.

HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

"Good mother," he said, "you know how people talk about ghosts — God curse them! I never saw a ghost there myself, and I have visited that place many times during the fig season. With regard to the safety of the young man, let me say that our whole clan will guarantee it. We will give our lives before we will allow his small finger to be hurt. My kinsman, Abu-Nasif, is the bravest man in our town. He fought the Druses in the year '60, and still keeps his old gun hanging upon the wall. He is so fond of it that he changed it some time ago from 'flint' to 'cap'; he is ready for any danger, human or *djinn*. Be sure, good mother, be sure of the safety of the youth."

Asaad's outburst drowned the original issue and made my grandmother feel that the strength of the hills was on our side.

"Get a piece of paper," said my father to me, "and let us write an answer to Abu-Nasif's letter."

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The request gave me deep concern. It almost spoiled the holiday for me. I had been hoping all the time that dread task would not fall to me. "How," I thought, "am I going to be able to answer such a long and learned letter, especially in the presence of the messenger?"

"We have n't any paper, father," I answered.

"Look on the shelf next to the pillows," said my father. "I put a sheet there some time ago."

I got up and did my best not to find any paper.

"There is n't any, father, and the ink-well is dry," I said with a downcast countenance.

"Go, then," commanded father again, "to Yusuf's house and borrow half a sheet. The other day, when he wanted to sell his olive-trees in the lowlands, he bought a double sheet for the deed, but the sale was not made, and he still has the sheet. Go and borrow half of it."

"Oh, I don't like to go and borrow paper from

HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

Yusuf," I replied with still deeper dejection. "Do we have to send a written answer?"

"Not at all!" spoke Asaad, "no, not at all, master. Abu-Nasif told me that a word from your lips to me that you would accept the job would be all-sufficient. I beg you trouble the dear son no more with this matter. Besides, I must be going as soon as possible."

"Dear Asaad!" I said to myself, "may you live as long as Jared."

"There is nothing more, then, that needs to be said at present," added my father. "I hope in a week or ten days to send the men to Abu-Nasif, and I have no doubt that they will build the house for him properly and before the occurring of the winter season."

Asaad would not accept our invitation to stay overnight at our house. So my mother, overcoming his polite remonstrances, wrapped up in his red bandana a few loaves of bread, containing

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some of the food left from our dinner, for his *zad*. He tied the bandana around his waist, with the *zad* resting on his back, put on his shoes, grasped his staff, and after profusely thanking us for our hospitality and wishing us a thousand good things, set out on his return journey to Ras-mola.



CHAPTER II

ABU-ROSTUM AND I

ABU-NASIF's poetical praise and extolment in his letter of my father's "far-famed genius and ability" as a master-mason was not so far out of the way. As a contractor and builder my father carried on a large business for many years. At the height of his prosperity, he employed from thirty to fifty men, and as a builder he was sought from far and near. From our home town, which is situated on the western slopes of Mount

ABU-ROSTUM AND I

Lebanon, Syria, in the province which bears the name of that historic mountain, our building enterprises radiated for many miles around. Not being able to give personal attention to all of the many applications which came to him, my father often placed me in charge of less extensive undertakings, such as the erection of ordinary dwellings, which, in so poor a country as the interior of Syria, involved no complicated architectural designs. In fact, in that part of the world we had never even heard of an architect in connection with our trade. The stone-mason exercised the functions of architect, builder, and inspector.

My own industrial career was an exceptionally fortunate one. When at the age of nine I was taken out of a little missionary school and "put to work," my father's men received me as a privileged character. The master-masons under my father gave me every encouragement to learn the trade. At the early age of fourteen I was allowed

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to "mount the wall" — to do actual building — and at the age of sixteen I was classed and paid wages as a "master." I was second in command over the men, after my father, and for that reason they accorded me the respect which my years did not really merit. In such exceptional circumstances, I learned not only to work at my trade, but also to be a good business manager. I was very thorough, very conscientious in my work, and was, therefore, in great demand. These being the circumstances, my father had no hesitancy whatever in placing me in charge of such enterprises as the one Abu-Nasif's letter described.

I was very pleasantly curious to know our kinsman, Abu-Rostum, whom my father had been expecting, and who was to share with me the responsibilities of the Rasmola business venture. I had never met him before, but had heard of him as being a man who, while he had never distinguished himself as a stone-mason, was accom-

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plished in other ways. He was good at soap-making. He was a church "reader," and chanted at the Mass charmingly. He was, I had been told, well versed in the Psalms and knew many of the magical mysteries which the Psalms were supposed to contain. And not the least of his merits were his fighting qualities, which he had always turned to good account in our clannish fights. His last two qualifications — namely, his intimate knowledge of the mysteries of the Psalms and his fighting power — appealed to me most powerfully.

With regard to his soap-making, my sentiments were neutral. I did not care much for soap in those days.

Abu-Rostum arrived at our house at about the time he had been expected. He had come to my father looking for work. I was much pleased with his coming because I was anxious to proceed as soon as possible to Rasmola and explore the

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mysterious region of which Abu-Nasif's messenger spoke to my father.

Our kinsman proved to be shorter of stature than I had visualized to myself, and therefore much less imposing than I had expected to find him. His trunk was well knit together and rather long, but his legs were disappointingly short, and conveyed the impression that they came into being as an after-thought of Mother Nature's. He had a good face, and, in spite of his small size and the peculiar mechanics of his lower extremities, was endowed with a creditable measure of strength. He smoked almost continuously, and I am led to believe that because of that his breathing was wheezy; at times it resembled the sound of sucking soda-water through a cracked straw. He had a fine voice and an animated presence, and was sociable and generous. Although he was not very felicitous in his speech, yet his qualifications as a talker exceeded his qualifications as a

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listener. When listening to a conversation he appeared to be struggling inwardly to prepare an answer, rather than to be interestedly and respectfully absorbed in what was being addressed to him. Nevertheless, I liked Abu-Rostum. He was not the only human whose possibilities, both physical and spiritual, had been only partially realized.

My father and I informed Abu-Rostum of the prospective job at Rasmola, and he seemed to be much pleased with the fact that such a good job had been waiting for him. My father's instructions to us were of a general character. Two facts he was especially desirous that we should keep in mind. First, not to allow Abu-Nasif to plan a building larger than he could ultimately pay for, and, second, in case we made a contract with our employer, to guarantee the building for one year from the time of its completion, "excepting in case of a landslide and thunderbolts." It was also

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understood that, although Abu-Rostum was about double my age (I was then about seventeen), the work was to be in my charge.

Having previously sent word, and such of our tools as we could not carry ourselves, with the muleteers to Abu-Nasif, Abu-Rostum and I started for Rasmola. It was on a bright and warm Sunday afternoon, shortly past the middle of September.

"I am so happy to find you such a fine and valiant young man," said Abu-Rostum to me as we, with our loins girded and our staves in our hands, followed the rocky road on our three hours' journey to Rasmola. "I knew you as a little child; but your parents moved from our home town when you were about six, and since that time, until a few days ago, I have never visited your family."

"I have been told," I answered, "that you were present at my baptism."

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“Yes, and about half our clan was at your father’s house on that day and we had a great feast. Wine ran like water on that day. I was just beginning to be a reader at the Mass, and I intoned certain sacred passages at your baptism. Ah, how the years pass!”

“You must know all about the Psalms and their mysteries.”

“No, not all. No man can know all the mysteries of the Psalms. It may be Solomon did, because he could talk to all the animals on the earth and could make the *djinn* do his bidding. But I know a great deal about the Psalms of David — as much as a weak and sinful man like myself can know. And although I know many worldly songs, my chief joy when traveling alone is to chant Psalms, especially, ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name.’ The reverential mention of ‘His holy name’ drives away all evil spirits.”

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This fact was not new to me. I had known it from infancy. My father often chanted that Psalm also when we traveled in the night. However, I was very curious to know more definitely Abu-Rostum's view of ghosts, so I said to him:

"Abu-Nasif's messenger told us the other day that some time ago a ghost appeared where we are going to build the house for his kinsman. What should we do if the mysterious thing attacked us?"

"It depends," answered Abu-Rostum, "on the kind of ghost. If it is angelic, we have nothing to fear, but if it is satanic, we should have to wrestle with it by the power of the Psalms. But," he added, "satanic ghosts do not appear in the daytime, and in the night we shall not be in that locality. The place must be 'inhabited.'" (The Syrians use the word "inhabited," *mascoon*, for "haunted," on the theory that the spirit *dwells* in a place, or a person.)

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“I have traveled far,” continued Abu-Rostum, “and seen all sorts of men and magicians. The most powerful magic comes from the Bible. It is magic, however, which must be used for good and not evil. Its purpose is to conquer, and not to make alliance with, Satan. So in this sense it is divine wisdom. Solomon knew all about it.”

At this point the seam of Abu-Rostum's cigarette opened, and he stopped meditatively to rejoin it by moistening it with the tip of his tongue on the right side of his mouth, with his right eye discreetly closed against the pungent smoke of the home-grown, half-cured tobacco. Presently a black snake, apparently encouraged by our silence and ignorant of my companion's magical powers, came winding its way across an open space in front of us. Instantly Abu-Rostum fixed his eyes upon the reptile and began to repeat inaudibly certain mysterious words. Seeing us, the snake hesitated a moment, whereupon,

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and most foolishly, I said, "It stops; let us kill it!" The snake resumed its course more expeditiously than before and quickly disappeared on the opposite side of the road.

Abu-Rostum looked sadly disappointed. "Why did you speak?" he asked me. "You broke the spell. If you had remained silent the snake would have stood motionless by the power of the formula I was repeating. Your words weakened its power and released the snake."

My ignorance of the potency of my own words and their power to so dilute the essence of even divine magic formed my excuse.

"Tell me," I begged Abu-Rostum, "what you were saying."

"No!" he answered with solemn definiteness; "I am not allowed to do so. You are too young for such things, or, I should say, not trained for them. Sometime you may know."

In all other matters, however, and in spite of

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my neutralizing his magical formula by talking so thoughtlessly about the snake, Abu-Rostum remained pleasantly communicative, as well as a cordial listener to accounts of my youthful dreams and ambitions. His chanting of Psalms and other sacred poetry, with a liberal inclusion of worldly songs, gave the rugged charms of our surroundings a touch of sweet humanity.

Our road lay on the eastern declivity of the first chain of rock-bound hills which form the western slopes of Mount Lebanon and extend the base of that scriptural "pinnacle of the earth" to within a few miles of the blue waters of the Mediterranean. Immense cliffs of solid rock towered above us on either side of a vast gorge which yawns between the main elevation of the mountain and those less lofty terrestrial swells. Little villages, with their flat earthen roofs covered with the drying fruits and vegetables of the late summer season, nestled on

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either side of a tortuous stream in the more fertile regions of the romantic valley below us. The shadows of the declining day had begun to soften the sharp, ragged outlines of the rocks and to fill the wide gulf with majestic gloom. Their flowing tide, so full of mystery, was rolling toward the bold summits the golden mantle cast upon the mountain heights by the receding sun. The vesper bells from lonely convents, perched on consecrated hilltops, were answering one another across the mighty chasm. The flocks had begun their reluctant homeward march from the brown late-summer pastures, with the shepherds watching and coaxing the stragglers into a quicker pace. The softening light of day rendering more mystical every moment the outlines of the surrounding heights conduced to more vocalizing of Psalms on Abu-Rostum's part which continued, with brief pauses now and then to mend a cigarette, or roll a new one, or to give an enlighten-

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ing comment on what was being sung, until we reached the immediate environs of Rasmola.

We entered the town at about sunset. Not a few of the women were still on their way from the evening "filling" of their water-jars from the clear and copious fountains of Rasmola. To us the sight of *filled* jars carried on women's shoulders was a good omen. An empty jar meant a bad fortune — emptiness. The welcome odors of the outdoor summer cooking at that evening hour floated upon the air and benevolently neutralized the other odors of the narrow and dusty footpaths of the town. Mothers were nursing their children on the doorsteps and by the boiling pots. The few wine-shops were still vocal with the hilarity of Sunday afternoon revelers. Small groups of the dignitaries of the town, in holiday attire, were still at the *saha* (town square) enjoying wholesome clan gossip, while they fingered their play beads and puffed cigarette smoke.

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With no great difficulty we found our way to Abu-Nasif's house, not far from the Church of Our Lady, which we entered with the usual ceremony, wearing the commanding airs of enterprise and wisdom. With dignified, patriarchal generosity Abu-Nasif received us into his hospitable home, declaring to us that he felt unworthy of the honor of having us come under his roof. Turning to me, our host said:

"I have no doubt your respected father sent you and your companion to me as his personal representatives, because he believes you to be wise master-builders. Therefore I honor you both, for your father's sake, and because, even from ancient times, it has always been considered seemly to honor wise minds and skilled hands. You are exceedingly welcome to my humble dwelling and to eat my bread and salt."

Abu-Nasif's wife was generous with her bread and salt. Our supper consisted, so far as I can re-

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member, of a highly nutritious dish of rice and chick-peas cooked together in mutton fat, cheese cakes, olives, grape sugar in a semi-fluid state, and bread. At the supper table Abu-Nasif spoke most appreciatively of the manner in which my father received his messenger and kinsman, Asaad; then somewhat abruptly and almost automatically shifted to detailing the merits of the letter which his nephew wrote to my father.

“No doubt,” said our host, addressing me, “no doubt Asaad told you what a marvel with the pen my nephew, Selim, is. Of course the letter was not all of his origination (*insha*). There were many people here on that night, because they had heard of my intention to have Selim write that letter and that I was going to build and so forth, and many of them dictated. But Selim put it all in a manner to be proud of. His mind is very ingenious, and the school taught him much.”

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After a short pause which enabled Abu-Nasif to free his organs of speech from an exceptionally large morsel of food, he continued: "Now, masters, one of the important reasons why I want to build a new house is the probability of Selim's getting married this winter. We are still negotiating the marriage, but we are likely to succeed before long. And, you know, being his father's elder brother, I must be forward in everything pertaining to the happy event. My heart's desire is to spread a great wedding-feast for Selim in the new house,—oh, may God prosper us! The damsel," went on the good man, "whom Selim intends to take to wife, God permitting, comes from a highly respectable family from the neighboring town of Sarfa. Her father has much —"

"Oh, a great deal," interrupted Abu-Nasif's wife most unexpectedly; "they are rich. They get their flour from Damascus, they have acres of mulberry-trees and vines and fig-trees and a

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large flock of goats. She has nobody knows how many fine garments. They sold two hundred-weights of silk cocoons last June."

"Yes, all that," spoke Abu-Nasif in a somewhat higher key than before, casting at the same time what appeared to be a very casual sidewise glance at his wife, but which in reality was indignantly designed to make her yield to him the right of way again. "Yes, all that; but Selim deserves all that they have. His learning, his spear-like stature, and his beauteous face are all above price. When you see him, masters, you will say, 'Happy is the damsel that weds him.'"

The bounteous supper over, Abu-Nasif proceeded to acquaint us with the plans for the house he had in mind. The presentation of the matter was brief and to the point.

"I want a three-room house," he said — "the two upper rooms to be large enough to accommodate my crop of silk cocoons, and to provide

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space for the yield of my vines and fig-trees and a comfortable shelter for me and my family. The lower room I shall use for wood, charcoal, and like necessities, leaving enough room for the stabling of a cow, and an enclosure for a brood or two of chickens. Furthermore, I beg you to proceed with all speed to construct the house before the winter season overtakes us."

To us, Abu-Nasif's instructions seemed most concise and explicit, and his keen desire to have the house built before the winter season set in, perfectly justifiable. Therefore, Abu-Rostum and I soon put our heads together, hitched our mental faculties to Wisdom's star, and in a very short time informed Abu-Nasif that such a house as he contemplated building should be so many cubits long, so many high, and so many wide; the walls should be one cubit thick, and the foundations, like those of the house of the "wise man" of the Sermon on the Mount, were to rest

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on solid rock. The estimated cost was also respectfully submitted.

However, for the purpose of making our plans more clear to Abu-Nasif, and the still loftier purpose of impressing him as deeply as possible with our architectural ability, I proceeded to objectify our statement by sketching the plans right before his eyes. The facilities for performing the ambitious architectural feat consisted of a chunk of charcoal for a pencil, and, for paper, the surface of the circular depression in the floor, which served as fireplace. Accurate measurements were for the time being no consideration. For straight lines, I trusted to the eye. No curves entered into the design. Elevations were not called for. The sketch of the impromptu plan, which was watched with admiration by the company present, especially Abu-Nasif, consisted of four straight lines enclosing an oblong, another line marking the place of a partition between

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the two upper rooms (for lack of facilities and other reasons, the lower room was not sketched), and very short lines marking the places of the doors and the windows — one door and one window for each room.

“No wonder,” said Abu-Nasif to me with great animation as he smiled over the charcoal design, “your father puts you in charge of buildings, in spite of your tender years. An ingenious mind (*'akel zeky*) guided your hand when you drew this fine plan. So says the proverb, ‘It is the nature of the duckling to swim.’ You are your father’s son. May God protect you.”

I tried hard to appear humble in the face of such lavish and sincere appraisal of my architectural endowments. To have won Abu-Nasif’s heart so quickly by the dexterous use of a piece of charcoal, all of which was the result of a mere after-thought I had, seemed to me a very auspicious beginning of what proved a most eventful enterprise.

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“Your plans, masters, are faultless,” said Abu-Nasif, “and the suggested cost is reasonable. God permitting, we will proceed with the work to-morrow. I have already a quantity of stone gathered from old buildings, which will help to hasten us on our way. I have also engaged three laborers for you; two of them are Druses from a neighboring hamlet, and the third one of our own people.”

A bed was spread for us on the floor in a corner of the living-room where all Abu-Nasif's family slept. We were promised, however, for our permanent lodging-place, the use of a small adjoining storeroom, which was to be put in order in a day or two, with two beds in it, instead of one.

It was in a very happy frame of mind, and with sanguine hopes and a prayerful spirit, that we went to our first night's repose under Abu-Nasif's roof.



CHAPTER III

THE ROUND HOLE IN THE ROCK

EARLY on the following morning our employer conducted us to the "parcel of ground" on which the house was to be built. It was a terraced hillside at the southwest corner of the town, some distance from the outermost fringe of houses, and just below a rocky elevation on which stood an ancient convent of Saint Elias.

Like many other localities where convents have been built, the region was picturesque and lonely.

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The sandy and somewhat thin soil supported grapevines, fig, pomegranate, and olive trees of moderate yield. Shaped stones and other remnants of masonry gave evidences that the "ancient buildings" which once stood there could not have been of great antiquity. A short distance to the south the hillside was much more steep and the ground rocky and barren. It gave the appearance of a region which ghosts might frequent.

Our immediate task was to gather and shape the necessary quantity of stone, to which we applied ourselves with such enthusiasm as made Abu-Nasif rest assured that his new house would soon become a tangible reality.

About the middle of the forenoon, we saw coming toward us by the footpath which led from the main road to Abu-Nasif's land the abbot of the convent of Saint Elias, accompanied by one of the monks. The aged holy man,

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pale-faced, tall, and well built, attired in the black and coarse garments of his order, with his cowl fallen from his black cap over his shoulders and his silver cross and chain, which seemed an extension of his white luxurious beard, glistening upon his breast in the morning sun, looked indeed the epitome of centuries. The composed demeanor and trustful step of this priest of the order of Melchizedek, King of Peace, symbolized to our confiding minds with fresh charm, the everlasting reality of religion which has swayed the thoughts of men for untold centuries.

As soon as he saw the abbot, Abu-Nasif brushed the dust from his hands against his woolen 'aba and hastened with reverential cordiality to meet him.

"God give you good-morning!" (*Allah yusab-ihak balkheir!*) exclaimed Abu-Nasif, as he kissed the hand of the distinguished visitor and the silver cross upon his breast. "Your Reverence's

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visit blesses us all this morning and our enterprise. I feel overwhelmed with joy — ”

“God bless you, my son, Abu-Nasif,” said the abbot, as he lifted his hand with a benediction over our employer’s head. “May God prosper you — may God prosper you, your workers and all your dear ones,” continued the holy man. “He is our help in all things.”

Abu-Rostum and I were not long in following Abu-Nasif’s example and paying our respects to the good abbot.

Upon reaching the spot where the new house was to be built, our visitor halted, and after easing the fatigue of his walk by a few deep breaths and a little coughing, looked around thoughtfully, then said to Abu-Nasif:

“So you are going to build — you are going to build; may God be with you. About where is the house going to stand?”

“From that large fig-tree this way,” answered

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Abu-Nasif. "The fig-tree will be close to the north end of the house."

"Yes, yes," spoke His Reverence, "you will dwell under your own vine and fig-tree. May the promise of the Holy Book be fulfilled to you and you dwell in peace in this pleasant spot."

"By your intercession," replied Abu-Nasif with humble satisfaction.

"By the intercession of the Saints," replied the abbot, as he turned and looked at Abu-Rostum and me.

"These are our master-masons," said Abu-Nasif; adding with a cordial laugh, "they are good men, but they belong to the Greek Church, father."

"Oh, they are schismatics!" exclaimed the abbot with a benignant smile. "Never mind, my son, we will pray for their restoration to the Mother Church and to allegiance to the throne of Peter."

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"We are all in the fold of Christ," remarked Abu-Rostum with the dignity of one well versed in church lore.

"*Our* church is the Mother Church," said I with youthful zeal and impetuosity.

The remark provoked a general laugh.

"I had expected," said Abu-Nasif, "to have this young man's father take charge of the work, but it was impossible for him to come, so he sent his son in his place."

"So the young defender of the Greek Church is your chief master-mason!" said the abbot, with a happy twinkle in his eye.

"Yes," replied Abu-Nasif, "but he is wise far beyond his years. I wish Your Reverence could have seen what he did last night at our house. He amazed me. In a twinkling of an eye, and with only a piece of charcoal to work with, he drew the whole plan of the new house, doors, windows, and all. It was marvelous!"

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“That is beautiful” (*jameel*), remarked His Reverence. “Now, my son, I seldom walk down this way, but I wanted to see you this morning and wish you prosperity by the will of God at the very beginning of your work. Now I must go back. You know it will take me some time to walk up the hill to the convent. My days of vigor are all behind me, and I am looking every day for my translation to the eternal mansions.”

“Be gracious enough,” said Abu-Nasif, “to lift up your right hand with a blessing upon us and upon this place. We want to build on sure foundations.”

“Yes, father,” spoke Abu-Rostum, whose knowledge of the Psalms found at this juncture occasion to come into play, “‘except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it’; give us your blessing.”

The good abbot poured out a comprehensive word of supplication for us all and pronounced a

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blessing upon the work which had brought us there together.

"Those gracious words will drive away from us every evil influence," said Abu-Rostum. "We shall not fear now the ghosts we have been told appeared at times in this neighborhood."

"No, fear not," commanded the abbot with reawakened interest. "Some of our monks told me some time ago that a female apparition was seen braiding her hair on one of those rocks yonder. I do not know whether it was so, or whether one of the monks had such a fancy, because he had neglected his devotions."

"I have never seen any such *djinn* in this place," stated Abu-Nasif, "but have heard of others seeing some."

"My son," said the abbot, casting a look around him, "if there are any of those beings here they must be friendly spirits. No other kind would dwell near a convent."

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"Because of the frequent chanting of Psalms?" questioned Abu-Rostum with the air of an authority on the Scriptures.

"Not only that," answered His Reverence. "The truth is, master, no evil spirit can defy the sound of a church-bell, especially the early morning bell. It is a horror to them. As you must know, this is the chief function of the bell—to drive the evil spirits away. They are likely to appear anywhere, but they dread a church-bell and the form of the cross. So if there are any spirits in this region they must be of the angelic kind."

Coming closer to the abbot, Abu-Rostum informed him in subdued tones of his ability to drive the spirits away by the power of the Psalms.

"That is good," spoke the abbot, "but the power of a layman in such cases is limited to self-defense. He has no scriptural authority to 'cast

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out demons.' This is the function of the consecrated priest; the power comes from the Master Himself, glory be to His name."

"But the magicians do drive away spirits"; said Abu-Nasif, "don't they, father?"

"A certain kind only," answered the abbot. "They can drive away a spirit that is bound by magic — the accursed art — to a certain duty. Here Satan fights Satan, but they have no authority over evil spirits, such as Christ has given the Church and is exercised by its priests."

Seeing that we were losing much precious time talking about ghosts, Abu-Nasif brought the awesome proceedings to a happy end by saying to his benevolent visitor:

"So long as that bell sounds from that sacred convent, I don't fear any evil. Your Reverence's intercessions also will protect us. Your visit has been such a blessing to us all, and I implore that it be repeated often."

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With a "God bless and prosper you," the abbot left us, and we returned to our work.

It must have been about the first of October when we broke ground for building. We set the square where the southwest corner of the house should stand, stretched the line northward in the direction of the large fig-tree, drove the stakes for the front wall and set the men to digging the foundation, which proved to be "near" — that is, the solid rock was soon reached; except that at the northeast corner the diggers discovered, in an area of "permanent" natural rock, a round hole about five feet in diameter, apparently cut by human hands in some bygone generation. Upon inspecting the rather strange opening, I ordered the men to dig a little deeper, with the expectation that the rock-bottom would soon be reached. They therefore dug to the depth of about five feet, but no rock appeared; they found, however, mingled with the soil, small

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quantities of mortar and fragments of pottery, which, together with the marks of the ancient workman's tools on the sides of the opening, awakened in us no little interest.

No less interesting to me than the round hole in the rock itself was the prognostic dialogue in which the two Druse laborers, Ahmed and Husein, were engaged, when I overheard them from the neighborhood of the fig-tree. Husein was down in the hole with a mattock and a wicker basket which he filled with dirt and handed up to Ahmed, who stood above at the edge of the mysterious opening. Puzzled by his surroundings and craving a breathing-spell, Husein leaned his left side against the handle of his mattock, wiped the sweat from his bronzed, rugged face on his right sleeve, reached through the open bosom of his coarse, fragrant shirt and scratched keenly and soothingly in the region of the left arm-pit; then with a deep sigh he mut-

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tered lazily, "O Allah, what can this thing be!" After a few moments of deep meditation and another comprehensive, satisfying scratch in the upper area of his back, Husein looked up to Ahmed, who had assumed a crouching position above, with the empty wicker basket dangling from his right hand, and said:

"What do you say this is, Ahmed?"

"This is a hole made by a thunderbolt," answered Ahmed with a broad grin.

"A hole by a thunderbolt? May Allah blast you! Does the thunder work with tools? Here are the marks of a chipping-tool, you donkey."

"Yes, it is the hole of a thunderbolt, and you know, if you have brains, that the bolt comes from the heavens, goes through the earth, and does not stop until it reaches the water under the earth. In a little while I hope you will drop down into those fearfully deep waters, and we will get rid of you."

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"Oh! how I would like to take hold of your unclean neck and break it! It would be such a relief to our village if you and all your clan were thrust into those waters under the earth! Do you know that some of our village people are going to petition the Government to exempt your clansmen from the poll-tax, because you are all feeble-minded?"

"You are in the right position to be buried; if you say more such words I will haul this dirt down on your stinking head. So you'd better shut your mouth with a big clod and keep quiet."

"You would not open your big mouth with such words if I were where I could take hold of you. You know who I am, don't you?"

"If you know so much yourself, say what this hole is?"

"This hole is a *nawoos* (Jewish tomb). May God curse them! the Jews wanted to be buried

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in the rocks in order to keep their bodies whole to the day of resurrection.”

“No; this is the well of a grape-press. If you dig a little deeper you will find some molasses for our dinner. Go deeper.”

“Curse you! curse all your relations! All you want is to fill your belly. The grape-press has more than one well. There is the large treading-place [where the grapes are trodden] and two or three wells into which the juice runs to settle. But there is here only one well; it must be a Jewish tomb in which I wish I could bury you. Drop that basket down.”

Having had all the enjoyment I cared for from the hilarious dialogue, and not wishing to have Husein and Ahmed waste any more time in meteorological and historical controversy, I came to them and asked Husein:

“What is happening down there?”

“Master,” answered Husein, “this hole is

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bottomless. The dirt gets finer and softer the deeper I dig, and there is no sign of rock."

"It looks like the hole of a thunderbolt," said Ahmed, somewhat timidly.

"No, Ahmed," I said with the gravity of a real boss, "a thunderbolt does not make this kind of hole."

The remark called forth a loud laugh from Husein. He felt more sure of the soundness of his own judgment than ever before.

Abu-Rostum and I concluded that further digging would be useless, and although we both felt very curious to know what the real character of the hole was, yet, in order not to allow our curiosity to impede our progress, my partner and I concluded to have the round hole filled up with stones and — that we might secure a firm foundation for that corner of the house — to bridge it over with a small arch. The men were notified to this effect and in a short time the

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interesting opening was filled up to a level with the surrounding rock.

But at the close of that day, after our helpers, the "laborers," had gone, Abu-Nasif, Abu-Rostum, and I, undesignedly and by a common irresistible impulse, found ourselves standing together around the curious hole, and saying to each other, "What might this thing be?"

"It may be that we have stumbled upon a *mekhbaiiah*" (hidden treasure), suggested Abu-Rostum.

With a restrained but deeply significant smile Abu-Nasif remarked, "I am not easily disturbed by such things, but of a truth, masters, I have had such a suspicion all this afternoon; certainly this hole is a strange thing, inasmuch as it is the work of the tool."

My youthful mind was filled with excitement; I had had that suspicion too, and now that my elders had so expressed themselves, my

THE ROUND HOLE IN THE ROCK

hope was suddenly transformed almost into a certainty.

Nor is it strange that we were all strongly pre-disposed to believe that we had stumbled upon a *mekhbaiah*. In Syria it is universally believed that hidden treasures may be found anywhere in the land, and especially among ancient ruins. This belief rests on the simple truth that the tribes and clans of Syria, having from time immemorial lived in a state of warfare, have hidden their treasures in the ground, especially on the eve of battles. Furthermore, the wars of the past being wars of extermination, the vanquished could not return to reclaim their hidden wealth; therefore the ground is the keeper of vast riches. The tales of the digging and finding of such treasures fill the country. There are thrilling tales of treasures in various localities. Gold and other valuables are said to have been dug up in sealed earthen jars, often by the merest accident, in the

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ground, in the walls of houses, under enchanted trees, and in sepulchers. From earliest childhood the people's minds are fed on these tales, and they grow up with all their senses alert to the remotest suggestion of such possibilities.

This mode of thinking is clearly reflected in that short parable in the thirteenth chapter of Saint Matthew, in which it is said: "The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field." It was most natural, therefore, for us to suspect that the round hole might be the doorway to a vast treasure hidden somewhere in the heart of the surrounding rock, and to decide to follow up our enchanting clue.

منه عظماء ورجل



CHAPTER IV

TAKING COUNSEL TOGETHER

At sundown we assembled at Abu-Nasif's house to take counsel together. Through mental germination, under the spell of all that we had been taught with regard to hidden treasure, "the will to believe" grew steadily stronger; therefore the chief problem which presented itself to us was how to devise the best and safest method of finding the precious pots of gold.

But this problem was no simple one. In the

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first place the treasure might be guarded by a *Russed* — a dread, deathless spirit which knew neither slumber nor sleep. For was it not told often of persons who presumed to possess themselves of an enchanted treasure, that they were smitten mercilessly by the *Russed* with incurable physical and mental afflictions? There was Yusuf Abu-Hatim, who had recently died, and who was still remembered by many in our community chiefly because of a horrible deformity from which he suffered as a result of an encounter with a spirit treasure-guard. For years Yusuf's lower jaw had been so twisted that his tongue touched his ear whenever he attempted to speak. Another unfortunate was Makhoul Asaad, who under similar circumstances was smitten with a perpetual hunger which made of him a howling beast. Other men suffered other punishments for their intrusion upon the domains of the mysterious powers.

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In the second place, we had always known that the Turkish Government prohibited secret digging for treasures, under severe penalty. Such operations could be safely carried on only after a government permit had been procured; but it was well-nigh impossible to obtain these permits, and moreover they stipulated (according to the popular and in all probability inaccurate understanding) that one third of the treasure should go to the finder or finders, one third to the owner of the land in which the treasure was found, and one third to the Government. In Turkey, especially in the days of Abdul-Hamid, we were ruled not by laws but by men. What the past had taught us with regard to such cases was that, in administering the "law," the Government usually took all that was found, and rewarded the digger by throwing him into prison on the charge that he must have found much more than he had made known to the officials. It was for the serious

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consideration of these and kindred, though less weighty, matters that we assembled at Abu-Nasif's house on that memorable evening.

The company included Abu-Nasif, his wife, his daughter-in-law, his two sons, 'Assaf and Mulhim, Abu-Rostum, and myself. After the Oriental fashion, we all sat on the floor, which was covered with straw mats, cushions, and sheepskins. The men formed a semicircle which terminated at either side of the *maukedah* (fireplace) sitting "knee upon knee." The women, who were not supposed to take a conspicuous part in the deliberations, sat at one side, behind us. The elder lady, like the "virtuous woman" in the Book of Proverbs, "laid her hand to the spindle" and spun thread; the younger lady was making an *arkiah* (the white muslin skull-cap, closely stitched, which is worn under the *tarboosh*, projecting slightly around the forehead, and is to the *tarboosh* what the cuff is to the

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sleeve). Those good women, however, were not altogether detached mentally from the subject in hand, for as we progressed in our serious deliberations they gave pious sighs and cast upward looks which signified a profound imploring of the higher powers.

Of course, profound secrecy was the first prerequisite, and to this all of us pledged ourselves without the slightest mental reservation. Abu-Nasif, being the oldest man among us, as well as the owner of the land, occupied the seat of honor. He was a man of dignified but stern appearance, reserved in speech, of a fiery temperament when crossed; and although of a stubborn will he was paradoxically capable of startlingly sudden mental changes. On this occasion, however, he was very tractable, even amiable, and spoke in a wise and happy manner.

Our first decision was that we would not notify the authorities of our intentions. The prize we

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were seeking seemed to us great enough to justify our running the risk of being "caught in the act," rather than expose ourselves voluntarily to Turkish injustice and cruelty. The affair was wholly our own. Furthermore, Abu-Rostum and I realized instinctively that if the authorities were notified, and, in the event of our success, took one third of the treasure, and if Abu-Nasif took one third as the owner of the land, and then he, his wife, his sons, and his daughter-in-law took their shares, as "diggers," of what was left, our portions would be indeed very small. Consequently Abu-Rostum and I were decidedly opposed to the ruinous legal method of procedure.

The mystery of the *Russed* next claimed our attention. It was barely possible that the treasure we were seeking was not "guarded." But what if it were? Which one of us was so foolhardy as to presume to run such an awful risk? In due time a great *Múghreby* (magician) must be sought

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to neutralize the mysterious power for us before we should venture to possess ourselves of the discovered gold. But such a necessity was as yet remote; much work must be done, and stronger evidences of the existence of the treasure secured, before the aid of *Múghreby* was absolutely needed. *Russeds* had often been known not to molest treasure-diggers until they presumed to carry the gold away. Some spirits had even been known to give warning, in rattlesnake fashion, thus affording intruders an opportunity to escape before the treasure was disturbed. One of our townsmen, who possessed a self-augmenting memory, often told me of a treasure in a cave in the neighborhood of Mount Hermon — a heap of silver coin, which no man could carry away because of the *Russed* which as yet no magician had been able to “neutralize.” That man asserted that he himself visited the cave and handled the coin; but that when he tried to carry some of it away he

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could not find the door of the cave, and kept going round in a circle until he dropped the precious burden.

The immediate problem, then, was how to carry on the necessary operations of digging without being discovered. The enchanted spot was somewhat remote from the more populous section of the town, but the convent of Saint Elias was only a short distance away, and several monks labored in its fields and vineyards daily from dawn till dusk. Just a little way below us there was a public fountain, to which all day an almost unbroken line of women came to fill their jars. Besides, there were our tenders, Ahmed and Husein, the Druses, who dug the hole for us, and whom we certainly did not wish to admit into our confidence. In such matters no Druse could be expected to keep the secret of a Christian, the "enemy of his faith."

We met the first of these difficulties by decid-

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ing that, as it was well known to the entire community that we were building a house near the convent, the presence of laborers in the neighborhood would excite no suspicion. As to Ahmed and Husein, some way could easily be found to "lay them off" for a day or two, and they lived in another town far away. How to dispose of the ancient coin and jewelry without being suspected of having found a treasure, did not at the time perplex us very seriously. In fact we were averse to even the slightest suggestion which tended to dampen our ardor and weaken our resolution.



CHAPTER V

SELIM AND THE MYSTERIOUS MAN

HAVING thus disposed of our problems, we fell into poetic contemplation of the glorious future which loomed before us. The palaces we designed that night for our future dwelling-places, the Arabian steeds, Persian hand-wrought arms, European carriages, and a multitude of other luxuries, formed the extensive programme of the millennial period which seemed about to dawn

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upon us; and our imaginings did full justice to the Oriental passion for idleness and luxury. True, some differences of taste were manifest among us with regard to our future environment and mode of living, but they were not serious enough to precipitate a quarrel.

The evening took on its gala aspect when our host and employer, Abu-Nasif, swayed most happily by the vision of an opulent future, asked his wife to unlock the old wooden chest next to his bed and bring out whatever confections were there and put them before us.

“Get out those hazel-nuts, wife,” he said to her, “and the sugar-coated chick-peas; get us also a plateful of those yellow raisins from the small earthen barrel in the corner, and the bottle of *'arak* from the shelf over the barrel.”

That was the first time since Abu-Rostum and I had come under Abu-Nasif's roof that such a spread had been put before us.

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“We have been keeping these things,” stated Abu-Nasif with a smile, “for times of sudden arrival of guests, when it is necessary for a family to save its face by being ready to put something before such visitors. But,” he added, looking at his wife who was already exploring the old chest and bringing out from among her husband’s holiday garments and some heirlooms the precious reserve of confections, “bring them on, the Lord will provide for the future.”

One of the sons who was particularly fond of *'arak* brought out the bottle from its hiding-place, and the other placed upon the floor before us a large straw tray of bright colors and a pleasant design, on which his mother put the confection plates.

“To your health, masters,” said our host as he lifted the first glass of *'arak* to his lips. “To your health, all; may we drink it again, all of us, in celebration of the great find.”

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"In sha' Allah!" (By the will of God!), we answered in chorus. "May He grant it!"

The cup was passed around and drunk with the same pious desire and imploring for the realization of our great hopes. Even the women took a drink, which, however, is not uncommon in that country on festal occasions. Never did the cracking of hazel-nuts under our teeth and the crushing and mastication of sugar-coated chick-peas sound so musical as they did on that evening. Nor did the agitating joy of the hour have any adverse effect upon our appetites.

Abu-Rostum favored us with a few lines from the Psalms chanted sweetly and low. He seemed certain of success, and his knowledge of the mysteries of the sacred writings elevated his hopes, in our estimation, to the lofty heights of a divine assurance.

"Do you know, masters," said Abu-Nasif, as he gazed dreamily at his cigarette held artistic-

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ally between his smoke-yellowed fingers, "I have always longed for a complete set of Persian arms — a gun, a pair of pistols, and a belt-knife, all Persian."

"Hmm," grunted Abu-Rostum, "a rich uncle of mine once had such a set, which he bought from a Persian tobacco merchant in Damascus. It was the joy of all the eyes that looked at it and the pride of our clan."

"Yes, yes," returned Abu-Nasif, "I have seen such arms. The marvel about them is the magical tracery on the iron. It is like the creeping of fine brown ants and possesses real magical powers. They say that the *djinn* never will attack a man armed with such weapons, and that a shot from them carries farther and hits more accurately than from any other weapon. When fortune comes, a set of Persian arms shall be my first purchase."

"It must be true that such arms possess mag-

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ical powers,” commented the learned Abu-Rostum, “because we are told that the Persians worship fire and exalt Satan — may God cast him off!”

“Another thing,” spoke again Abu-Nasif, with his curved index finger in the air, “and it is a thing which I once saw in my younger years in the eastern part of the country. You know those Arab emirs are wonderful men. On occasions they do lofty deeds.”

“He is going to tell of that Arab wedding,” said his wife to her daughter-in-law in gentle accents.

“Yes, that is it,” continued Abu-Nasif. “When the great Arab sheikh came to that wedding (and I shall never forget it), and just before he reached the large house where the festivities were being held, the father of the bridegroom ordered the killing of three sheep, right in the way of the visiting sheikh, and made him ride over the blood into his yard. Would not my heart dance for joy

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if I could invite Fu'ad Beg, the Governor of our district, to Selim's wedding and kill a sheep in front of his horse and make him ride over the blood to our new house? O Giver of all good (*ya mâ'aty*), grant it!"

"Amen!" from all of us.

"An Arabian thoroughbred is my desire," said 'Assaf. "The saddle of such a mount is heaven. With a fine suit of lead-colored broadcloth, a wine-colored velvet vest, a white-and-black silk sash, patent leather high boots, and what the *Affrenj* (Europeans) call a *marteen* (Martini rifle), I shall be satisfied. Would not the hearts of the young men of this town melt within them with envy to see me so attired on the back of such a charger?"

My own desire was for a spacious mansion with quite an arsenal of varied weapons, a *kar-rusa* (carriage) and not a few servants. I had the legitimate desire also for a "most beautiful wife."

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"When fortune comes, cousin," said Abu-Rostum, with both arms in the air, "even a king's daughter will be glad to marry you!"

The wishing went on merrily. The women wished for silk gowns from *Frensa* (France) and various other feminine joys.

Be it said, however, to the glory of the feminine sex that it was Abu-Nasif's wife who, on that evening of riotous wishing for earthly power and glory, counseled us to be humble of heart.

"All this is worldly pride," she said to us with a most humble smile, as she rested her spindle resignedly in her lap. "Say 'as God wills.' Make vows to the Saints. I shall be willing to dress always just as I am now dressed, in this blue muslin dress, if we only are granted the treasure. May God forgive us all this wishing!"

"Of course as God wills," came from the rest of the treasure-seekers.

"Not by our own power," said Abu-Rostum

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with a somewhat forced humility, "do we expect to have all these things. He who dwelleth on high is our Helper; without Him we can do nothing."

The assent of the rest of us to these prayerful observations was not altogether induced by the fact that if we ever needed divine help in any enterprise it was then, when success meant ease and emancipation forever.

The brief lull which logically followed these pious remarks was characterized by occasional and meditative dipping into the confectionery plates. Presently we heard quick and vigorous steps approaching our door, and before one could say, "Listen, who is coming!" there walked in Selim, the letter-writer, who was "a marvel with the pen" and whose stature was "spear-like" in flexibility and grace.

"My soul, my heart, my eyes" (endearing terms), exclaimed Abu-Nasif, addressing his

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nephew, "what brings you here at this hour of the night? What, Selim?"

"A very important matter," answered Selim with ominous air and firm accents.

"What can that be?" asked the uncle.

Selim appeared reluctant to speak of the "important matter" before the whole company, especially because Abu-Rostum and I were strangers to him.

"Speak out, my heart," urged Abu-Nasif, "these masters are no longer strangers to us; I have come to love them as the members of our own family. Speak, dear Selim, and quickly!"

"News has just come to my father from Sarfa," said Selim with profound agitation, "that the parents of the girl are wavering in their promise to us —"

"Wavering!" shouted Abu-Nasif; "what for?"

"The rumor is," answered the "marvel with the pen," "that a young man of their own blood,

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of the clan of Aswed, has come forward and asked for the girl for a wife, and that his immediate family expect to approach her father some time this winter with the proposition."

"The dogs!" exclaimed Abu-Nasif; "where on earth or in heaven can they find one like you for their daughter —"

"Oh, Mother of Christ!" burst out Abu-Nasif's wife, "what must those Asweds of Sarfa be to want any other young man but you, who are the flower of all young men!"

"Uncle!" shouted Selim, with his right hand on the hilt of his belt-knife and his eyes flashing fire, "I shall go to Sarfa alone — yes, alone! — and get her from those dogs, even if they were a thousand! I will make this steel" (drawing his dagger) "drunk with their blood! It is my own honor and the honor of our clan, uncle, and not the girl that I am after."

"Oh, misery!" cried Abu-Nasif's wife with her

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hands over her eyes. "Selim, my heart, don't shed so much blood. Let them have their girl; there are many others who will die to marry you."

"Never!" shouted her sons. "We will have her for Selim at the point of the sword; it's honor now, and nothing else!"

To show our personal interest in the momentous enterprise, Abu-Rostum and I entered into the conversation with feeling. We counseled patience and waiting until more was heard from Sarfa on the subject.

"I will tell you," said Abu-Rostum with sage-like gravity, "all this means that they want you for a son-in-law and no other. They have floated this rumor that another has come forward to marry the damsel in order to make sure of you. Between now and the Advent have the espousal ceremony take place and be generous with your wine and confections on that occasion. After the espousal occurs, then they are bound fast, and

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by Easter-time let the *ikleel*" (the solemnizing of the marriage) "take place. I know well how these marriage affairs go," added Abu-Rostum with a wise smile soon clouded by a puff of smoke from his cigarette.

"Abu-Rostum's words sink deep into my brain," said Abu-Nasif with the joy of one who had found the means of warding off a calamity. "That must be the case with those Asweds of Sarfa, and I want you, dear Selim, to be calm. For the color of your beloved eyes, I will spend what is necessary in order to show those people what we really are."

"But, uncle, you are not rich, nor is my father."

"Be not anxious about that," answered Abu-Nasif, looking into the future. "I will bear the expense of the espousal, tell your father. This will we do: after I am done with the plans of building, your father and I, and several others of

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our representative men, will go to Sarfa for the espousal ceremony —”

“Take the priest with you,” observed Abu-Nasif’s wife with a strongly reinforcing gesture. “Take the priest with you and let him with their own priest make the ceremony very sure in its binding power.”

“Yes, we will do that,” said the uncle; “and tell your father, dear, that I will order from Beirût by the muleteer two *rottles* [the *rottle* is about five and a half pounds] of sugar, one *rottle* each of hazel-nuts, sugar-plums, sugar-coated chick-peas, and two *rottles* of plain roasted chick-peas and raisins mixed. We will take also a whole goatskin full of wine and a quarter of a *rottle* of coffee. Those dogs of Sarfa ought to be satisfied with all that for the espousal occasion.”

Selim’s countenance shone brightly. His stature became more spear-like than ever.

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"Uncle," he said affectionately, "may God prolong your life and keep you as our great reliance. I must go, because my father is anxiously waiting to know what you thought of the matter. Good-night!"

Selim dashed off with great hopes, and our own circle regained its composure.

The hour was then late and our treasure plans seemed to have been finally agreed on. So after a brief silence disturbed only by a few yawns, Abu-Rostum suggested that we go to bed. The remark met with acceptance by the members of the company, with the exception of Abu-Nasif. He seemed for a few minutes to fall into a state of deep contemplation. His face was illumined as with a new and significant vision, and his eyes moved dreamily from one face to another. Presently, pushing his turbaned *tarboosh* back from his forehead, he startled us with the following tale:

"*Ya shebab*" (valiant young men), exclaimed

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Abu-Nasif, "hear, and I will speak to you! Many years ago, while on my way from Beirût, I stopped to sustain my heart with a morsel of food at the inn of Ber-el-Werwar. While I was eating, my eyes fell upon a *Mûghreby* who sat near the door of the inn, wrapped in his dark striped cloak. So mysterious was he that he might have but just emerged from the cave of Daniel.¹ Whenever I looked at him I saw his black piercing eyes fixed upon me, and I feared that he might bewitch me. But I named the Holy Name and thus strengthened my heart against him. Having done with my food, I lighted a cigarette and braved danger by going closer to the mysterious man. From his manner I perceived that he had some-

¹ The cave of Daniel (the prophet), with the walls covered with *talasim* (mystic inscriptions), was supposed to exist deep in the heart of the earth, somewhere in North Africa. The earth yawned at that spot only once each year, when seekers after the supreme art of magic descended into the cave and there stayed a whole year without food, emerging when the earth yawned again, instructed in all the mysteries of the diabolical art.

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what to say to me, so I moved still closer to him and respectfully asked him:

““O Hajj, have you aught for me, and is it salaam and good fortune?”

“Fastening his fire-striking eyes more intently upon me, the *Mûghreby* answered:.

““Yes, wayfarer, I have somewhat to tell you, and it is salaam and good fortune, if you prove yourself cautious and deserving. You are a dweller of the mountain region; you own a parcel of land near a shrine. In one of the terrace walls of that parcel of land is a high rock chipped by a stone-cutter’s tool. If you would possess riches, measure forty cubits from that rock eastward and dig. I will say no more now; only that you must beware of the mysterious powers. Allah is the wise and bounteous giver.””

Abu-Nasif’s revelation thrilled our souls to the very center.

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"And what did you do about it?" was our eager question.

"Nothing," said he. "That was shortly after the *herekah*"¹ (disturbance), "when the blood was still hot and men's minds were perplexed. Later, the rolling on of the years made me forget the matter."

Angels! What clearer evidence did we require to prove to us that Abu-Nasif's parcel of ground contained a treasure?

The night being cloudy and dark, no measurements could be taken then; but we watched for the morning.

¹ A brief civil war between the Christians and the Druses, in 1860.



CHAPTER VI

THE DARK CAVE

ON the morrow, at the earliest dawn, "before faces could be recognized," we were on the interesting spot. We found the "high rock chipped by a stone-cutter's tool," and measured from it "eastward" forty cubits. The fortieth cubit spanned the mouth of the round hole! Our joy reached the point of consternation. Riches lay at our feet! Should we not proceed at once to uncover the treasure? But that would not be wise. Our helpers, Ahmed and Husein, would soon be with us, and if they once got wind of our in-

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tentions they would certainly betray us to the dread authorities. We would therefore possess our souls in patience through that day, follow our normal activities, and in the meantime find a suitable excuse to dispense with the services of the Druses for the morrow, when we would proceed with the digging, all by ourselves.

The day seemed endless and full of drudgery. To be toiling like slaves while riches lay at our feet was anything but pleasant; but we bore up under our secret with stoical fortitude. Aside from a few significant glances and winks which we shot at one another during the weary hours, we betrayed no signs which could awaken the suspicions of our alien fellow laborers. But what excuse could we find for telling them not to come on the morrow?

Here Abu-Rostum, who was a church "reader" and often assisted at the Mass, came to the rescue. His suggestion was that we tell Ahmed and

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Husein, who knew nothing about the Christian calendar, that the following day was a holy day on which we Christians were forbidden to work, and of which we had forgotten to speak to them earlier in the week. Furthermore, the following day being Friday, it would not be worth while for them to come on Saturday; therefore they need not report until the following Monday. The two Druses, fearing the loss of their job altogether if they should remonstrate, accepted the situation, with what inward dissatisfaction we did not know or care.

Threatening weather gave us an added sense of security from intruders on that Friday morning. As the early rays of the gray dawn began to stream over the heights of Lebanon, our party of seven, five men and two women, began the work of removing the stones which the workmen had thrown into the round hole two days before. Needless to say, our hands moved with

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such power and swiftness that in an incredibly short time all the stones were thrown out; and the digging was resumed with the greatest eagerness.

We had not gone deeper than a foot when there appeared at the west side of the opening the edge of a large slab of stone about five inches thick, standing upright, sealed around the edges with mortar and apparently covering the mouth of a horizontal excavation. When this stone was partly uncovered, I took the hammer and tapped it lightly three times. The strokes produced a hollow sound and a faint echo within. Our hearts beat violently, and our faces turned pale with excitement.

Abu-Nasif, who stood above at the mouth of the opening, with his wife and daughter-in-law, as sentinels, reverently lifted his turbaned *tar-boosh* from his head, crossed himself, turned his face toward the shrine of Saint Elias, and in

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most solemn accents vowed that if our efforts were crowned with success he would place over the image of the gray-bearded Saint a jeweled crown of pure gold. The two women sealed the fervent vow by beating upon their breasts and saying imploringly, "Yea, Amen!" which was echoed with profound sincerity by each one of us.

Saint Elias was accorded the first honor simply because he was the superhuman personage nearest to us geographically. The Virgin Mary, Saint Antonio, whose shrine crowned the rocky summit overlooking the fertile valley in which the town nestled, and other Saints who were deemed the mightiest helpers of men, were implored with most persuasive promises to take a deep interest in our enterprise. I now realize that only a gold mine of the richest output could have paid all the vows we made on that occasion.

After we had dug to the depth of about three feet behind the stone slab, Abu-Rostum swung

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his hammer and struck the stone several times at about the center. It broke and fell in many pieces, revealing a large dark cave, lit only by the light which streamed into it through the opening we had just made.

Instantly Abu-Rostum jumped into the hole, muttering what sounded like pious words. The women, forgetting for the moment the danger of such demonstrations, gave a scream. 'Assaf and Mulhim gave vent to their pent-up feelings simultaneously with a characteristic Syrian expression in the Arabic language: "*Igit wa Allah jabha!*" which is, by literal interpretation, "It has come, and God has brought it"; and in more intelligible English, "Fortune has come, by the grace of God." Abu-Rostum and I felt too full for utterance. And suddenly, without knowing how we got there, we two found ourselves squeezed together in the square opening on our way to the darkness within. No sooner did we

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get inside than our three comrades came in, elbowing one another, the sons (forgetting for the moment the proprieties of patriarchal family life) preceding their father. The women remained outside and hurled questions at us while they implored us to beware of the *Russed*.

Before us lay a cave about forty feet long and twenty-five feet wide. The soft chalk-rock ceiling had crumbled with the flight of the years, and had come down in heaps at various points. The huge fig-tree growing in the soil above sent its roots through the seams in the rock to the cave below. But on the left as we entered, the rocky wall of the cave was of a more solid substance, and, as far as we could see, smooth as the palm of the hand.

The roughness of the interior of the cave and its vastness seemed for the moment to overwhelm us. Where were we to dig? What spot of the large interior held the treasure? What were

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we to do with the huge masses of crumbling rock? Abu-Rostum and I were the hope of the party in dealing with weighty engineering problems. but the difficulties of our situation were practical, not technical. Time, labor, and the ability to remain hidden from the gaze of the outside world were the things most needful; but they would be difficult, if not impossible, to secure. For how could we hope to have the power to do the amount of work required? And how, supposing that we could do the work, were we to disguise such vast operations on the pretense that we were only building a house?

However, it was most natural for us to want to test certain spots, in the hope of at least securing encouraging clues. So it was decided that we should proceed with the digging, very cautiously, close by the smooth rock, which seemed to us to be the sign left by those who buried the treasure, to guide them back to it.

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The pickaxe and shovel brought to the surface pieces of mortar, pottery, and some ashes. Favorable signs, especially the mortar and pottery. Further digging multiplied those signs, but revealed no new ones. We worked until shortly past the noon hour, as we saw by the shadows of the trees and the convent walls, when we laid down our tools and sat together in a sheltered spot to eat our frugal lunch and take further counsel. After the short period of silence which always characterizes the beginning of a meal with a hungry company, desultory remarks began to fall from our lips.

“Mysterious! all is mysterious!” murmured Abu-Nasif, as in a trance. “I am convinced; there is a treasure under my fig-tree, but we must be wise in seeking it. The help of magic must be sought. We need, first, to know positively the exact spot where the treasure is buried; and, second, the potion to break the spell of the

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Russed. I shall not allow any further digging without such means. Years ago the *Mûghreby* warned me against the mysterious powers, and I do not feel that the lives of my sons and your lives, masters, should be recklessly exposed to such awful danger, seeing that our wrestling is not with flesh and blood, but with superhuman principalities and powers.”

Silence fell upon us. Abu-Nasif reached for his tobacco-bag of brown worsted and rolled a cigarette; then took out his flint and steel and a bit of tinder from a small leathern pouch, “struck fire,” and in a meditative, almost abstracted, manner, poked the burning tinder with the edge of the flint into the end of his cigarette. The smoke seemed to break the spell. Resting his chin lightly on the end of his thumb, Abu-Nasif spoke again:

“All signs, masters, seem to point to the fact that some spirit inhabits this place. Besides the warning of the *Mûghreby* to me years ago, the say-

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ing of one of the monks of Saint Elias's convent, as the abbot told us the other day, that a spirit had been seen in these parts, is also important. It comes to my mind now that the dwelling of that spirit is in the cave we have just discovered, so we must be warned."

Then it flashed upon me that Abu-Rostum's profound knowledge of the Psalms, by which he could "arrest" snakes and do many other mighty works, might save the situation. So I turned to my colleague with the disconcerting question:

"Can't you," I asked, "use your sacred magic in this case, vanquish the spirit, and make it safe for us to dig further for the treasure?"

Seemingly Abu-Rostum had been hoping all the time that such a stupendous responsibility would not be placed upon his shoulders. He knew his own limitations much better than I knew them. My question troubled him.

"My magic," answered Abu-Rostum with

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considerable embarrassment, "is of the sacred kind. The *Russed* spirit, being commissioned by a magician to guard a treasure, requires like magic to release it and drive it away. You see," he added with soothing confidence, "if this spirit has appeared about this spot *in spite of the convent bell*, it must be then a spirit that has been bound to a certain duty — that is, it must be a *Russed*. So did the holy abbot speak to us about such spirits that are bound to certain duties. I do not dare, nor does my sacred magic allow me, to combat such an evil being."

Abu-Rostum escaped a dread responsibility more easily than I had thought he could. None of us urged him to reconsider his decision and undertake the mysterious task. The fact was we instinctively shrank from the thought of resigning our lives to his amateur art. The situation required the skill and daring of a veteran magician of the first magnitude.

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After careful deliberation, therefore, it was decided that two of us should proceed at once to Beirût to consult and seek the aid of El-Abdeh (colored woman), a Mohammedan witch whose powers were supposed to equal those of the ancient witch of En-dor whom Saul sought in his extremity. The fame of El-Abdeh filled the land from Aleppo to Beirût and the regions of Judea. Great were the marvels she accomplished, from the finding of a lost bracelet to the unhinging of the most august human intellect. Of a truth she had the power of rendering any *Russed* harmless, inasmuch as she was a most intimate friend of Beelzebub. Associated with her was a *Mûghreby*, who was also deeply versed in the diabolical arts, and who, in joint counsel with the Abdeh, dealt with the men clients.

To Beirût then, without delay! Meanwhile Abu-Rostum and I decided that it was not at all

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safe to build the house over a cave, that the plans must be altered, and that word should be sent to our Druse laborers bidding them not to come to us until further notice.



CHAPTER VII

THE GREAT MUGHREBY

MULHIM and I were chosen to undertake the momentous mission to Beirût, which lies a good seven hours' journey, on foot, from Rasmola. We were instructed that if the *Russed* potion cost much more than two *madjidies* (the *madjidy* is the Turkish dollar, about eighty cents), we should not pay the price without further instructions from our comrades. Five *madjidies* were given us for consultation fee and personal expenses.

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We started on our journey about the middle of the afternoon, and, notwithstanding the fact that we had worked from early dawn, youth and the allurements of riches gave us quick and elastic steps. Night overtook us when we were still about three hours' journey from the great city. The region in which we found ourselves shortly after nightfall was the borderland between the provinces of Mount Lebanon and Beirût, and it is usually infested by highway robbers. The darkness, the rough, narrow, crooked footpaths, and our increasing fear of robbers kept all our senses at an uncomfortably high tension.

Shortly after crossing the river El-Ghadir, whose banks are famous as haunts of robbers, a low, deep, harsh voice called from behind a stone wall, "What men?" — the equivalent in English of "Who goes there?"

"Friends!" we answered, in rather squeaky accents.

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The figure of a tall man emerged from the darkness. Gripping tightly our walking-sticks, our only means of defense, we stood in a defiant attitude. As the man came closer we recognized in him a stalwart Turkish¹ soldier, fully armed and wearing the Mount Lebanon uniform. Holding his gun and bayonet at a threatening angle, he ordered us to halt; and this we did, while we asked, "What is your pleasure, sir?"

"Who are you and where are you going?" asked the soldier of the Sultan.

It was well known to us that the Turkish soldiers, who were presumably "guarding the roads," were as dangerous to meet under these circumstances as the highway robbers from whom they were supposed to protect the public. We

¹ This does not necessarily mean that the soldier was a Turk by race, but was serving in the Turkish Lebanonian army. That army consisted entirely of Christians and Druses. This soldier was a Christian.

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stood rigid with fear until the man approached and placed his hand on my shoulder, when to my inexpressible relief I recognized him as a very good acquaintance of our family. His wife came from our town, and I had seen him at our house many times in my earlier boyhood.

"Is this Asaad Effendi?" I asked.

He leaned forward and tried to see my face in the faint light of the stars, but could not recognize me. "Who are you, lad?" he inquired.

After I had told him who I was and had mentioned the name of his wife's family, he was cordial and said to us:

"The times are disturbed and the Government is greatly agitated. These parts are very troublesome always, but recently a robbery and murder occurred near here and the authorities are burning to find the criminals. I am in command of the guard all along this road to-night. But you are safe. Go on your way, and if you should be ac-

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costed by other soldiers tell them that you saw me near the bridge of El-Ghadir, and they will let you pass unmolested."

Thanking him and our stars for the unexpected kindness, we resumed our journey.

Upon reaching the carriage road near the "guard house" known as Fûrn-Eshiback, quite close to the outskirts of Beirût, we were glad to get into a public carriage, which took us into the great metropolis.

But during this short ride, Mulhim caused me much anxiety. Owing to the fact that another passenger was in the carriage, Mulhim sat with the driver, who proved on close inspection to be an old acquaintance of his, the stranger having come from a village near to Rasmola. Presently I heard him exclaim:

"Is this Malluke? Malluke! *Keif halek?*" (How are you?) "What pleasure, *exceeding* pleasure, it is to see you, old friend!"

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"Mulhim?" inquired Malluke with equal cordiality and effusiveness.

"Yes, I am Mulhim, son of Abu-Nasif from Rasmola."

"Allah, Allah, how delightfully strange this is! By Allah, this is a blessed night. Mulhim, I have not seen you since we boiled Easter eggs together at our own home three years ago. Friend, what is it that is taking you to Beirût?"

Our fearful experience with the soldier near El-Ghadir had already begun to react upon Mulhim. The face and cordial words of an old friend following closely upon that experience made Mulhim too confiding and too talkative for our own good. Malluke's question instantly aroused my fear. In this I was fully justified by Mulhim's answer.

"What is taking me to Beirût?" spoke my altogether too happy partner. "If you only knew, Malluke, if you only knew!"

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“What can it be, Mulhim?”

“It is a thing which, by Allah, if it came true I would not be as I am now.”

“By the Virgin, Mulhim, tell me; tell me so I can rejoice with you. Is it marriage to some rich girl of Beirût, or some high position, or what?”

“The story is a long one. Oh, dear Malluke, if things turn out as we hope, you will know. You *will* know when you see me on the back of a blond Arabian steed —”

At this point my fear became a terror. Mulhim was surely about to let the cat clear out of the bag and put us in a desperate situation. The other passenger with me in the carriage was a Mohammedan, and I dreaded the possibility of his getting the faintest idea of the object of our mission. He seemed, however, to be in a world by himself. So far as I could see, his eyes were closed most of the time and he seemed to me to be either dozing or repeating his prayers.

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But it surely was high time for me to check Mulhim in his dangerous course.

"Stop talking about blond Arabians," I called from behind with a forced laugh and a sharp punch with my stick in his back, "and give me a cigarette."

The look upon my face which met Mulhim as he turned around to hand me a cigarette proved sufficient to check his flow of soul concerning the great future which lay before us. Malluke was somehow sidetracked and we were saved from a possible disaster.

Upon our arrival in the great coast city of Syria, we sought lodging, not at an inn as the poor people do, but at a hotel.

The supper we ordered would, under ordinary circumstances, have been beyond our means, but seeing that an opulent era was soon to dawn upon us we deemed it altogether proper, nay, necessary, that we should begin to practice luxurious

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living. But even then Mulhim declared that when fortune came he would not even look at such a hotel and such a supper as that; to which I rejoined, "I should say not!"

Although very tired from our journey, sleep seemed to us out of the question. Besides, we had to plan very carefully how to meet the great witch and her associate *Mûghreby* on the morrow — a dread undertaking for two youths such as we were. Before leaving home on that day, Abu-Nasif, who for some reason admired my "mental equipment," instructed his son to give my ideas the preference in dealing with the object of our mission. The son followed his father's instructions and I felt heavily laden with responsibility.

My plan was that we should make a false statement to the *Mûghreby* for the purpose of testing the power of his magic. If he or the great witch could discover the deception, then we might feel assured that they could read the mystery of our

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treasure. Mulhim agreed to everything I said, partly because of the instructions his father had given and partly because of his strong desire to escape stating the case himself.

But meeting the witch and the *Mûghreby* was not our only difficult task. They lived in that section of Beirût known as El-Busta, the chief Mohammedan quarter; and for a Christian to pass through El-Busta without being roughly handled by Mohammedan ruffians was always considered a signal favor of fortune. The murders which occurred in El-Busta were utterly uninteresting to the public: the Christian fool had simply strayed to where he had no business to be, and no one took the trouble to inquire who killed him.

But the witch lived at El-Busta among her kindred, and there we had to seek her. From our physiognomy, attire, and speech, any one could tell that we were Lebanonian Christians. We wore on our heads the old-fashioned *tarboosh*

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(which was the ordinary headgear before the small tin-pail-shaped fez of the Turkish army had come into general use), whose top resembled the end of a pumpkin with a large tassel attached to the stem, and a small narrow-folded, wine-colored silk scarf of Damascus make for a turban: a characteristic headgear for Christian youth. We planned to conduct ourselves very circumspectly while at El-Busta. We would not gaze curiously at the Mohammedans, we would walk in a humble attitude, and strictly mind our own business.

Our plans having been so happily laid out, we sought some sleep. Our slumber, however, was of short duration. That part of Beirût in which we found ourselves was and is sleepless. Our hotel was located at the terminus of the Beirût-Damascus carriage road, on the very corner where the road merges with the chief city square, known then as *Sahet-el-Bourge*, and, since the

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proclamation of the Turkish Constitution, as *Sahet-el-Hirriat*, or Liberty Square.

This famous Square is the point of departure from Beirût for all the camel caravans and mule trains (so much more numerous at that time than since the construction of the railroad) for all parts of the Lebanon, Damascus, Homs, Hamath, Aleppo, and the Houran. So shortly after midnight the city around us became tumultuously alive with the movements of those carriers of all sorts of merchandise, as well as the increasing activities of sellers of bread, cakes, and other necessities of life, which they carried on trays on their heads and moved with them from place to place, calling their wares and prices at the top of their voices as they went.

To us dwellers of the mountain villages, the habitual commotion of a large city always was as pleasantly and grandly stimulating as the roaring surf of the sea. It was indescribably broadening.

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Especially was this true of Beirût, the great port of our whole country, and which for us united the life of splendid Europe with that of the ancient and dreamy East. One of the great ambitions of life for every child of the mountain villages was a visit to Beirût, and every visit to this Phœnician city made a second visit still more alluring.

For Mulhim and me this visit to the enchanting city was not the first one. Both of us had been there a few times before. But the present occasion differed essentially from all the preceding ones. This time we were there in a representative capacity with more money to spend and with brighter hopes for the future than we ever possessed before. The tumult of the metropolis, which we liked so well, no longer had in it the sad strain which told us that we were only transient sojourners amidst the wonders of Beirût, which our scanty fortune might not enable us to

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hear and see again, at least for a long time to come. No! On that momentous morning every agreeable sound seemed to us only a foretaste of the joy of frequent visits to Beirût in that near future when the earth should have yielded to us its treasures of buried gold.

Close to our hotel were several inns where camel-drivers and muleteers made their temporary headquarters. Through the window from our room we could hear the pious language of those elemental men — the heirs and successors of countless generations of Oriental wayfarers — while loading and guiding their precious beasts to the main thoroughfare. The invocations of divine guidance for man and beast at the beginning of a journey, so characteristic of the children of that land, which has given the world its most precious Scriptures and greatest prophets, were uttered in deep, guttural tones — the low vibrations of the yet lax and untuned vocal chords of

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early risers. The Holy Name was invoked by its multitude of attributes, a wealth of celestial terms in which the Arabic language excels all others. *Ya Qadir, ya Raheem, ya 'Ali, ya Razzaq, ya Waqi* (O Almighty, O Most Merciful, O Most High, O Great Giver, O Protector) floated upon the morning air like incense.

The thudding and shuffling steps of the camels, the firm, crunching treading of mules, the nimble trampling of little donkeys, the growling and barking of street dogs, and the rumbling now and then of a carriage, with the driver cracking his whip and calling to pedestrians, "Your back, your side, move out of my way," and like warnings, made a medley of sounds which only an Oriental city can produce.

But to Mulhim and me the most compelling of all in the morning twilight of that eventful day was the shrill voice of the seller of *sehleb sikhin* rising above the din on the opposite corner of the

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street. *Sehleb sikhin* (a dish of wheat starch cooked in sugar with a little milk and water and served hot) is considered in that part of the world a breakfast delicacy. The incessant calling of the purveyors, "*Sehleb sikhin, ya je'an*" (hot sehleb, O you hungry), stimulated our appetite. Therefore as the gray dawn began to steal over the city, we got up. Our morning toilet was rather simple. We put on our upper garments and shoes, which we had cast off when we crawled into our bed, dashed a little water over our faces, wiped them as much as we thought was expedient with the one small towel allotted us by the proprietor, put on our *tarbooshes*, and sought the *sehleb* man.

Around his portable charcoal cooker, on which the *sehleb* kettle simmered, the Mohammedan seller of the sweet commodity had a few cane- or rather straw-seated stools and a trayful of the delicious Beirût bread. Ordinarily one of the small loaves and a saucerful of *sehleb* constitute

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one's breakfast. With us, however, money under the circumstances was no consideration. We had a double order each, and finally refused to take back a small amount of change from the seller of *sehleb*. We must have seemed to him to be aristocrats traveling *incognito*. He was glad to have us remain with him until we finished smoking our cigarettes. He was even inclined, so far as his business permitted, to converse with us and ask all sorts of questions after the cordial manner of Orientals. To this, however, I felt somewhat averse. I was afraid that Mulhim might break forth again with his poetical description of the future and draw a word picture of his "blond Arabian steed." So at my instance we arose and took a stroll around Sahet-el-Bourge, which was becoming more intensely alive with all sorts of human beings streaming through it to their various places of business. We reviewed our plan and the manner of presenting it to the *Mûghreby*, and

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at the right time turned our faces toward El-Busta.

It was a great relief when we reached the notorious Mohammedan quarter, to find that the cafés were as yet almost empty. The vicious loafers had not yet come to their revels in the public places along the highway. Now and then we met a man who would eye us in stern and spiteful fashion, making our hearts beat faster than usual, but on the whole we were tranquil.

It was by no means easy to find the abode of the witch in a city where there were no regularly laid-out streets and no numbers on the houses. All we knew was that she lived at El-Busta, and as we were anxious to avoid trouble, we dared not ask questions. At last, meeting an elderly man whom we thought reasonably safe, we requested him most respectfully to direct us to the witch's house. Pointing to a mosque not far away, he told us that the house we were seeking was a short

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distance beyond that shrine, on the road that went to the right of it. Following those instructions we soon reached our destination.

After removing our shoes from our feet just outside the open door, we walked in, to find ourselves in the presence of the great *Mûghreby*, the witch's associate. We stood near the door in a reverential attitude until we gained his attention, when we saluted him with more regard than discretion. "*Essalamo 'Aleikûm*" (peace be on you) is a salutation exchanged by Mohammedans; but coming from a Christian to a Mohammedan it is considered by the latter very presumptuous. For how can an "infidel" confer peace upon one of the "faithful"?

The *Mûghreby*, possibly for business reasons, appeared not to notice the impropriety of the greeting. He responded by nodding his head slightly in a distressingly dignified manner, and motioned to us to sit down on the matted floor.

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Lifting our right hands to our breasts, thence to our foreheads, as a mark of honor and gratitude, we sat down.

The *Mûghreby* was a man of stout build, and appeared to be about fifty years old. He wore on his head a rather small white turban, more common among the Persian than among the Syrian Mohammedans. His face was round and ruddy, covered with a short, shaggy beard which enhanced the witchery of his dark piercing eyes. Over his typical Mohammedan gown, which was girt at the waist with a green sash, he wore a fine woolen cloak. He sat on a thick cushion spread upon a costly rug of mystic figures and bright Oriental colors, and reclined against a *messned* (a hard and heavy pillow) which stood on edge against the wall.

The witch, as we observed, was in an inner chamber, besieged by women suppliants, some seeking potions to make their husbands love

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them, or to unhinge the mind of a woman rival, some to secure the blessing of child-bearing, or to find some lost article, or ward off the evil eye. Sobs and groans issued from that mysterious chamber, and at short intervals the low, deep, commanding voice of the dread witch would reach our bewildered ears.

Presently the *Mûghreby* motioned to us to come closer, and as we did so he gazed on us in turn with the air of one who says, "The innermost secrets of your hearts are known to me."

Within his reach on the cushion lay among other curious objects an egg, which he picked up, in a seemingly preoccupied state of mind, set it up on its small end in the center of his extended right palm, and seemed to us to read in it deep mysteries. The feat of making the egg stand up in that manner excited our admiration.

Then, with a faint, quizzical smile, the ally of

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Beelzebub said to us, "What may your purpose be?"

My heart beat at full speed. But unmindful of the fact that I was in the presence of one whose magical gaze had searched the depths of a thousand craniums, I proceeded to carry out our pre-arranged plan by giving him a false statement of our case.

"Honored *hajj*,"¹ said I, "on last Monday, while this my brother and I were working in the field, and in the absence of our mother from home, our house was entered by thieves who carried away from it money and other valuables to the amount of about two thousand *piasters*. Having failed hitherto to apprehend the robbers, we have come to you, O excellent *hajj*, imploring the aid of your great learning to enable us to know who the culprits are."

¹ After having visited Mecca, a Mohammedan is addressed as *hajj*-pilgrim. The designation, however, is often applied to other than pilgrims, as a mark of honor.

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With a look of indignant surprise which caused his beard to quiver slightly, and which seemed to say to me, "You saucy upstart!" and without the slightest hesitancy, the great magician spoke.

"You are a liar!"

Rallying in a moment from this terrible, though merited, rebuke, I managed with considerable firmness to imitate the attitude of wounded pride and to say to my assailant, "O excellent *hajj*, I have not come under your sheltering roof and in your august presence to be called a liar."

"But such you are," came the quick answer; "you are seeking to possess yourself of the wealth of others, and yet you make bold to tell me that you have been robbed."

Here Mulhim, collapsing inwardly, cast a trembling look at me and seemed about to say, "If you do not tell the truth at once, I will."

Whereupon I said to the *Mûghreby*, "My lord, if what I have said is to your mysterious learning

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not the truth, I beg you to condescend and tell us the facts."

The magician then demanded the payment of one *madjidy*, as the initial fee for the unsealing of the book — whatever that meant. We complied with the request instantly. Then, to our indescribable amazement, this man of diabolical learning told us everything. He informed us that we were in pursuit of a hidden treasure; that we had dug for it in a round hole, then in a cave connected with that hole and close to a smooth rock; that the spot was situated below a shrine and above running water.

The expression on our faces must have pleased him immensely, for we felt for the moment that we were in the very presence of Omniscience.

"In digging," he said again, "did you find human bones?" The way in which he put the question did not give us the impression that he did not know the answer; rather, in our simplic-

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ity were we led to believe that a significant revelation was yet in store for us. To our answer in the negative, he said, "When the bones appear, look confidently for the fortune you are seeking." Then, stroking his elevated right knee gently, the wily *Mûghreby* added, "But — but beware of the mysterious powers. The treasure is guarded by a powerful *Russed* with which I am already in touch, and the gold must first be 'released' [from the control of the dread spirit] and the *Russed* driven out into boundless space before the buried wealth can be touched. Be not rash, else you will be blasted, when no earthly power can help."

Along with all this the *Mûghreby* bewildered us by mumbling something about "center and circumference, light and darkness, east, west, north, south, fire and incense," all of which inspired us with awe, though it added nothing to our understanding.

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"What would be the cost of the 'release' of the *Russed*?" I asked in much agitation.

"One *othmani*" (Turkish pound); "no more, no less," replied the wizard.

That was more than five *madjidies* beyond what we were commissioned to pay, even if we had had the money.

"Your Excellency," said Mulhim, "this is a very high price."

"High!" exclaimed the *Mûghreby*. "Just be mindful of the wealth which the release of the *Russed* would bring to you!"

Feeling still inclined to mislead the "possessed" man, I said, "My brother and I are poor, therefore we cannot pay such a sum; but we promise by the life of God that, if you will release the *Russed* for us, we will pay you double this price after we find the treasure."

Reaching for a small polished stick, and with it pushing my *tarboosh* back from my forehead,

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the exasperated *Mûghreby* said, "This head of yours contains a devil. This youth [Mulhim] is not your brother; three other men and one woman are with you in this secret, and you have been instructed not to pay me my price. Try me no longer!"

O great *Mûghreby*! Though he made a mistake in saying one woman, instead of two, we were convinced that the treasure was a certainty.

After we had told the magician that it was necessary for us to return to our partners, report what he had told us, and secure the price of the "release," he said, "Yes, go, but you will come back soon; I have you in the hollow of my hand."

We rose, walked backward to the door as behooved those retiring from the presence of an august Oriental personage, put on our shoes, bowed a reverent farewell, and departed.

Certainly we did experience a psychological revolution. We seemed to ourselves to walk on

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air and to talk by inspiration. We even forgot that we were in dangerous El-Busta. The prosaic theory of "mind-reading" had not yet been advanced, at least in that part of the world, and the spell of a superhuman mind rested thick upon us.

It was now about noon. We must have dinner and start for home without further delay. But should we make the homeward journey afoot? No; with such a bright future beckoning us there was no need for such privation. We would hire two good strong horses and ride home like gentlemen.

Having ordered two "good" horses from a "horse-keeper" who promised to have them ready for us in about an hour, we went to a *shou-wa* (a meat-broiler) for our dinner. The *shou-wa's* shop was of the average sort. A few street dogs lingered at its door with the fixity of a trade sign. Portions of a sheep carcass hung

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from iron hooks suspended from the ceiling, just inside the door on the left as you came in. On the right side close by the wall stood the charcoal grates clouded with the smoke of broiling meat. A long, narrow, bare table stood near the wall facing the door, a bread-tray rested on a small square table in the neighborhood of the suspended mutton, and a small quantity of watercress and parsley, with a few garlic heads and lemons, shared the small table with the bread-tray.

We ordered a piece of the loin — the finest for broiling — bread and a large dish of parsley and watercress salad. Our Mohammedan *shou-wa*, a slim, narrow-faced, dim-visioned young man of medium height, with a greasy cigarette in his mouth, which further dimmed his vision, stripped the flesh from the bones with creditable dexterity and proceeded to prepare it for us. He cut the chunk of loin in small pieces, at the

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same time guarding the fragments by delivering at long intervals well-aimed kicks at intruding street dogs who crept in instinctively and most unostentatiously, seeking whatever of the tantalizing viands generous fortune might bring their way, strung the pieces upon thin, square iron rods, and placed them over the fire to broil. He accelerated the combustion by wielding over the fire a fan of crow's feathers.

With equal dexterity he mashed a piece of garlic with a pinch of salt in a dish, squeezed lemon juice over the fragrant mixture, cut the parsley and watercress fine, poured them into the dish, mixed the compound energetically with his fingers, poured over it some olive oil and served it with the meat.

Our dinner was perfect. Another guest came in while we were eating. While waiting for his order he engaged us in conversation, after the cordial Oriental manner. He happened to be a

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Lebanonian also. He wished to know what our business was in Beirût, and when we expected to “go up” — that is, to leave the city for the mountains. Mulhim’s answer won my admiration. He no longer was so inclined to talk about his future “blond Arabian” to strangers. “We have a cousin,” he answered our fellow Lebanese, “at the Bishop’s College here in the city. We have just had a visit with him and we are ‘going up’ this afternoon.” Mulhim redeemed himself.

After our sumptuous dinner, we mounted and proceeded on our way to Rasmola, accompanied by a lad who was to take the horses back to their owner.

The road we followed — the Beirût-Damascus carriage road — until within about two and a half hours’ journey from Rasmola, was fully two hours longer than the road we had traveled the day before, but it was better for the

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horses. At sundown we found ourselves at the then famous inn called Khan-Abu-Dekham, where we halted for supper, and to rest and feed the horses. Not wishing to reveal our actual circumstances, and still relying upon our opulent future, we ordered liberally, taking even a draught of wine with the repast, and the inn-keeper was much impressed by our liberality and charged us accordingly.

It soon grew dark. Large black clouds overspread the heavens, and a rather strong wind began to blow. But we had never been in better spirits. Horses, youth, wine, and the deceitfulness of riches filled us with power and courage. We remounted our horses and rode off singing (with more enthusiasm than melody) vernacular Arabic poetry.

Soon after we left the carriage road, near the town of Behamdûn, and turned south toward our destination, our boy attendant rushed close

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to my horse shouting, "Master, I am afraid! Do you hear that noise?"

Halting a moment I could hear a tremendous rushing sound approaching. My first impulse was to lift the frightened boy on the back of the horse behind me. No sooner did I do that than a terrific hailstorm smote horse and rider, master and servant. It seemed that the celestial "treasures of the hail" were poured out to the last handful. The horses reared and twisted, now to the right, now to the left, in dangerous confusion. The driving wind and the incessant down-pour rendered us almost helpless. The few flickering lights in the town of Behamdûn were the only things we could see, and we pressed toward them.

We certainly were a wretched spectacle when we reached the village. Wilted and cowed by the raging elements, both men and horses were pitiable objects. Outside the large cities inns and lodging-houses are rarely found in Syrian com-

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munities. This was especially true at the time of our story. The wayfarer depended on the hospitality of private homes, which as a rule was freely extended.

On that night, however, we halted in front of a *dikkan* (small store) which was still open and whose owner was known to me as a friend of my father's. At least I thought he was. To him we applied for shelter for the night. Appalled by our condition, the *dikkanje*, contrary to the age-old Syrian code of hospitality, denied our urgent request. We felt almost crushed. We explained to this "friend" of my father's that we would stay with him only for a few hours, until we had dried our garments and warmed ourselves, but the case was hopeless. He pleaded that his wife was sick, which, however, as we subsequently learned, was not true. Finally we persuaded him to keep the boy overnight, promising to come for him the next day and to pay for his keep.

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The denial to us of hospitality in this manner awakened in Mulhim and me a spirit of heroism and disdain. We began to feel that we would not accept shelter under the conditions, even if it were offered to us. We would brave the elements and the night like men. So we bought from the man some *kaak* (Damascus whole-wheat, hard crackers) and, at his suggestion, a small bottle of 'arak "for a night like this," all of which I put in my saddlebag, and resumed our journey. We led our horses a short distance, in order to limber up our stiffened legs and quicken the blood currents in our chilled bodies. At the outskirts of the village we remounted. As I put my foot in the stirrup and lifted myself into the saddle, the bottle of 'arak, which apparently in the darkness I had inserted between the saddle and the saddlebag, fell and broke to pieces. "Oh!" we shouted. The loss of the quickening fluid seemed under the hard circumstances like the vanishing of a great hope.

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We pressed on. Rasmola was yet more than two hours away, the storm was still on and the darkness palpable. The road passed through my home town, but as my parents were still completely ignorant of the treasure adventure, and as I had planned to bring my share of the gold to them as a stunning surprise, we did not stop at our house on that night.

When we arrived, our partners at Rasmola were still up, eagerly awaiting us. We delivered our report to them in most glowing colors, for the purpose at least of justifying the extravagant expenditure of money on our trip. They stood aghast at the marvelous revelation of the *Mûghreby's* diabolical knowledge. The women crossed themselves — especially when we mentioned the fact that the magician read deep mysteries in an ordinary egg — and implored the Divine protection.

“And he told you all that!” spoke Abu-Nasif,

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nodding his head in great wonderment. "What is there that those magicians do not know?"

"He mentioned the round hole, smooth rock, convent, fountain, and all?" queried Abu-Rostum.

"All in a twinkling of an eye," we answered with enthusiasm and gratification.

"Satan must be used to fight Satan," added Abu-Rostum. "We must have the potion."

"But are we," asked Abu-Nasif's wife, "to deal with those dread spirits ourselves? O Allah, cast them off! My misery!" (*ya dhilly!*)

"If we deal with them — the accursed things!" observed Abu-Rostum, with soothing consideration for the mother's feelings — "if we deal with them according to the *Mûghreby's* directions there will be no danger. Did he say to you how we should do?" he asked me.

"No," I answered. "He said he would give us the directions with the potion."

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**“The wretch must know,” said Abu-Nasif,
“that there is a treasure in the cave. From what
he told the boys he seems to know everything.
We must have the potion. The price is small
compared with what we shall find.”**

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dream of great riches, the sense of economy still had its strong hold on Abu-Nasif. Our allowance, besides the Turkish pound for the *Mûghreby*, was much smaller than that granted on the previous trip, and we were instructed to return afoot.

In order to avoid arousing the suspicion of the townspeople we slipped out of Rasmola at early dawn. Reaching Behamdûn we picked up our boy attendant and proceeded to Beirût with all speed, and very shortly after our arrival in the city called at the *Mûghreby's* house. With a strangely peculiar smile whose meaning I did not understand then as I do now, the magician remarked, "I do not marvel" (*la aajab*) "at your return."

The various kinds of *Russeds* are "released" by different means: some by the sprinkling of enchanted water, others by the burning of incense, others by the repeating of certain mystic words. "Our" *Russed* required a powerful dose

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of strong incense, which the *Mûghreby* proceeded to prepare for us.

From a bag which contained many strange things, he produced a piece of frankincense about the size of a hazel-nut, which, as I remember, looked like spruce-gum. He placed it in the hollow of his hand, looked up, turned his face to the right, then to the left, then in a semi-entranced manner seemed to repeat, inaudibly, a certain formula. After repeating the entire performance three times, he breathed on the lump, wrapped it in a piece of white muslin, and then said, presumably to himself alone, "*Qatih-madhy!*" (decisive!)

In the meantime we had become rigid with awe, but were restored to normal tranquillity by his saying to us, "Now you are safe; wealth and happiness will soon be yours."

I received the mysterious object from his hand, paid him the price he had asked, and placed

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the lump securely in my girdle. We were instructed to burn the incense inside the cave in the presence of all the men of our party, and to dig within two cubits from the smooth rock toward the center of the cave.

After leaving the presence of the *Mûghreby*, though it was far past the noon hour, 'Assaf and I did not halt in Beirût even long enough to have dinner: we bought some food and ate it while on the march. The darkness of the night overtook us when about halfway to our destination. Our steps grew heavier and heavier as we toiled on up the western slopes of Lebanon. Owing to the fact that I had had but little sleep, and had been on a forced march for practically forty-eight hours, my physical energy reached a very low ebb.

'Assaf, whose vocation was that of a silk-spinner, was even less accustomed to physical exertion than I was; therefore he also began to feel much more strongly inclined to drop by the

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wayside and go to sleep, than to continue the toilsome journey. As we reached the neighborhood of the town of Alieh, we saw a faint, flickering light in the direction of an old, little-frequented inn called Khan-el-Sheikh. The slight ray seemed to our weary souls so friendly, so compelling, that we concluded to replenish our stores of energy by seeking a few hours of sleep at the old inn.

As we passed under the heavy stone arch into the huge room where the *khanati* and his wife were, it seemed to me the most desolate, most fearfully haunted place on this planet. When we asked the burly, stolid *khanati* if we could have a "sleeping-place in his hospitable khan, until the rising of the morning star," he cast a measuring look at us which really frightened me; he then muttered a favorable answer, and after puffing a few times at his cigarette in a gloomily meditative mood, he led us into a repelling en-

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closure (he called it a room), threw a dilapidated straw mat on the humpy, earthen floor for our bed, and gave us an old blanket of goat's hair to "cover us with." That was indeed the "abomination of desolation," but we decided to stretch our weary mortal bodies on what was left of that mat, for at least a couple of hours, and then continue our journey. But as soon as the *khanati* left us with his lantern (the only means of illumination he had) and we lay quiet between the mat and the blanket, our sleeping-quarters became strangely alive. Living creatures leaped from the cavernous stone walls and sprang from holes in the floor, even right under our mat, in ferocious gayety.

"Rats!" exclaimed 'Assaf. "One jumped on my *tarboosh*! They will eat us up."

"They certainly will do it," I said. And we decided that we would not be devoured by the rats on the eve of becoming millionaires; so we

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shook off the goat's-hair blanket and darted out of the room like frightened steeds. When we told our host that we could not stay with him overnight he simply frowned at us and said, "*Rúho!*" (Go!)

We did go, but it was terribly hard going. Darkness, hunger, fatigue, fear, and the rough, stony road made the walking horrid toil. A short distance east of the town of Alieh there lies a deep, rocky gorge, through which runs a small river called Bekhishtieh, at whose banks we feared the *djinn* might accost us, for the streams of water were the favorite haunts of those dread spirits. But on that night none of them were out, and we crossed the stream in safety. Before us as we stood on the eastern bank of the river towered the last chain of hills which we had to cross before our road took its downward course toward Rasmola. Before beginning our weary climb we sat for a little rest on a rock not far from the

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stream, in a world of darkness and silence. Presently we heard a jump, followed by a crashing tread among the fig-trees near the road. A hyena! We had been taught that the joints of the hyena squeaked as he walked, and certainly we could hear the "squeaking" and, as it seemed, see the faint outlines of the horrid form.

Without a word or even a whisper, and as by a power not our own, we sprang from our seats on the rock and dashed up the steep hill. Whether in a dream or in reality, whether we followed the road or not, how many times we stumbled and fell and rose again, I never could tell. I only know that when we spoke to one another again we were just below the crest of the hill on its eastern slope, speeding toward Rasmola, with my hand on the lump of frankincense in my girdle. It was past midnight when, with soiled and torn garments, bruised and exhausted, we reached our destination. Not until late in the afternoon of that day

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were we awakened and asked to give our report.

The mysterious frankincense — the “release” — and the simple instruction as to how to burn it in the cave were the alpha and the omega of our report. Indeed, nothing more was needed. Very early on the morrow the five men of our party (the women would not participate in the satanic performance) proceeded to the cave. Around a small charcoal fire we stood in a circle near the smooth rock, and as our venerable senior, Abu-Nasif, crossed himself and cast the potent incense into the fire, we all made the sign of the holy cross and said, “God cast thee off!”

As the smoke of the sizzling, gummy substance spread through the cave, Abu-Rostum asserted that he heard a mysterious moaning just inside the door. Was it not from the vanquished *Russed*? At any rate the cave appeared to us to have suddenly become friendly, almost

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habitable, and with the strength and courage which confidence never fails to inspire, we proceeded to dig at the point indicated by the *Múghreby* — within two cubits from the smooth rock, toward the center of the cave.

By taking turns we toiled strenuously the whole day; we changed the location slightly from time to time, packing the dirt in the remote corners; we found an abundance of mortar and broken pottery, but no gold. Not even bones. At the end of the day, disappointed and exhausted, we returned to Abu-Nasif's fireside for a final conference.

The seeming failure of all signs began to sober the enthusiasm and awaken the prudence of the older members of the party. Abu-Rostum, who had a large family to support, and no source of revenue but his trade, began to waver. The dream of riches began to fade before the glowing satisfaction of actual, though modest, wages, the

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loss of which he could not endure much longer. Abu-Nasif, the determining factor in our counsel, also seemed to be greatly perplexed. In a gravely meditative manner he stated that, while he had not lost all hope of finding "something" in the mysterious cave, he was becoming increasingly aware of the very serious risk he was running. While we possessed nothing but our tools, he had his valuable property, which might be seized by the Government authorities, if our secret became known. He said also that his slow progress in building had already been noticed by some of his friends, and that the aged abbot of Saint Elias's convent had asked him why so little was doing under the large fig-tree.

Abu-Nasif's final decision was that we suspend our search for the treasure for the time being and proceed with the building. As long as the treasure had been "released," he thought we could dig for it at our convenience without inviting sus-

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picion. Any other suggestion he would not countenance. Abu-Rostum and Mulhim seconded the projected plan, but 'Assaf and I dissented. Being in the minority and aware of Abu-Nasif's immovableness, we did not argue long; we simply whispered to each other that we would not suspend the digging.



CHAPTER IX

FARIS AND THE TREASURE

It was purely the exigency of the hour which forced me into this dual alliance. 'Assaf was by no means my favorite of the company. He was a "busybody in other men's matters," very insignificant in stature, of meager features, and had the lamentable habit of coming uncomfortably close to you when he spoke. In short, 'Assaf was such a type of man that, looking at him, a Socrates would have wondered whether great riches could really work beneficent changes in him.

Ours was by no means a light task. By detach-

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ing ourselves from the rest of the treasure-seekers and deciding to undertake the digging by ourselves, we faced a problem altogether too complex for our minds and our facilities to solve. The range of our freedom was greatly narrowed. It became essential for us to guard the secret of our enterprise not only from our neighbors and Government officials, but from our own former partners and members of our own household. We were obliged to work and live with them. Could it, therefore, be possible for us to elude their suspicions and observations of our treacherous activities?

On the following morning we went to work with our kinsmen, but had no opportunity to consider together a plan of action unobserved. We agreed, however, that after supper we would go out ostensibly for a *sehra* (to spend the evening with some friends), seek some secluded spot, and form a plan of action. Nothing had yet occurred

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to lead the rest of the company in the slightest degree to suspect our movements. They only knew that we did not approve the idea of postponing the digging for the treasure so indefinitely as they had decided to do.

So after supper and in order completely to mislead his father and the rest, my little accomplice, 'Assaf, arose and went to a small cupboard, which held divers kinds of household articles, in search of something. Then turning to his brother, Mulhim, he asked:

"Brother, where is that pack of cards we have? Abraham has been here for all this time and we have not taken him anywhere to a *sehra*. I want to take him out to-night and I would like to take the pack of cards with me."

"It is under the clothes chest," answered Mulhim. "Where are you going?"

"We are going where there is a good *sehra*," said 'Assaf. "I don't know yet where that will be."

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"Don't you want me to go with you?" asked Mulhim again.

"No, not to-night."

Mulhim knew his brother's peculiarities very well, so he said no more.

Upon going out of the house, 'Assaf said to me, "Follow me; we will go to the church of Saint John. It stands alone and there is a large oak-tree in front of it." To the Church of Saint John we proceeded with our burdensome secret. In front of that shrine stood a mighty ancient oak, a glorious specimen of those giant trees which have shaded the approaches to the sanctuaries of the East from before the days of the patriarch Abraham. A short distance from the ground, the huge trunk divided into three massive parts in such a way as to form a large recess of gentle slopes, into which the children climbed in their frolics.

In the deep and awesome darkness, we climbed into the body of that living but mute sentinel of

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the holy place and proceeded in trembling whispers to discuss our grave problem.

"If my father," began 'Assaf, "should know of this he would chase me from under the heavens. Yes, he would; I know Abu-Nasif."

In genuine, youthful, dramatic fashion, I spoke at once.

"By the life of Saint John and the lives of all those I hold dear, your father, 'Assaf, shall never know of this matter from me. I pledge you my blood to the last drop."

"And I say to you," reciprocated 'Assaf, with his hand stretched toward the church door, "by this holy Saint before whom we are, I will keep your secret even from my father and mother. Should my father know in some way — God forbid! — of this secret, I covenant with you now before God and Saint John that I will stand by you and if need be against my father. I only want you to know that I am speaking to you from a

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loyal and pure heart. Ah, if you only knew how my heart feels just now — *if you only knew!*”

“I am sure of all that,” said I, “my heart feels it; we will stand together whatever happens.”

It was a veritable David and Jonathan feast of youthful emotions; although our feelings which induced such solemn vows were impromptu, the vows themselves were no less ardent than those of our fellow countrymen of Biblical fame. For the moment, 'Assaf became to me an acceptable person.

“We want,” resumed my new intimate, “to know how to dig — see! who comes there? Two women with a lamp!”

On the right-hand side of the church building as you faced the door, hard-by the back corner of the edifice, was an old tomb of some righteous person known to former generations. It was a low vault which had three small openings in the front wall grouped in the shape of a triangle.

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The dead but ever-living personage, whose body reposed in that consecrated sepulcher, was known to have intercessory powers. In times of sorrow and affliction, devout persons came with olive-oil lamps and placed them in those openings of the vault as humble offerings of light, which were believed to move the Saint to intercede for the suppliants with the Most High.

The two women, whose approach had so solemnly interrupted our deliberations, were on such an errand of mercy. They had come to plead for some needy soul. Trustfully they approached the hallowed tomb, while we watched them with reverential silence, broken for us only by the violent beating of our hearts; placed the little lamp tenderly in one of the openings, knelt before it for a few moments in silent prayer, and departed.

'Assaf fumbled in his brain for the thread of thought which he had started out to spin before

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dy the feminine pilgrims of the night disturbed our
as seclusion. In spite of the small dimensions of his
of brain the thought got lost in it.

h "You were going to say something about dig-
1- ging," I said by way of a reminder.

," "Yes; we want to know how to dig for the
treasure without being discovered by my father
and the rest," he resumed.

." "Of course," I said; "that is the whole prob-
lem."

But in reality *that* was not the whole problem.
Even if we succeeded in carrying on the digging
secretly, physically the task was beyond our
powers. The work would have to be done in the
night; the newly dug dirt would have to be
packed in the farther corners of the cave; one of
us would have to act as a sentinel while the other
worked, etc. How could we, two youths, do all
that? 'Assaf depended on me to work out the
engineering plan, but the working-out of the plan

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did not mean the successful accomplishment of the actual, practical task.

Driven to our extremity, we finally decided to reveal the secret of the treasure to a man named Faris, with whom we had a very pleasant acquaintance. Faris was the bully of the town, and, externally speaking, a magnificent specimen of manhood. But he was a dangerous idler, suspected of many crimes, and living the life of a defiant outlaw. However, it was just such a fearless man that we wanted in our perilous undertaking; therefore to Faris would we unfold our story.

"It is early yet," said 'Assaf; "let us go to Faris's house."

We left the sacred oak and wended our way in the dark footpaths of the town to the adventurer's house. We arrived just as a guest of his, a man of his own type, was departing. "Everything will come our way in time," we heard the

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stalwart departing pal say to Faris as we approached the door. "We will *make* things come our way, friend," answered Faris; "go in the keeping of God until we meet again in the land of the East."

"*Marhaba, marhaba!*" (a cordial "Hallo!") said Faris to us as we came in; "two young lions! Come in and sit down."

"Who is the hero" (*buttal*) "you have just bade good-bye?" we asked with eager interest.

"Habib Faisal of Kermoosha," answered Faris exultingly.

"Is this the famous Habib Faisal?" we asked.

"Yes," said our hero, "this is the fearless Habib who has been the despair of the authorities for years. He is going East now and I expect to follow him by spring, and there" — added Faris with a smile — "we expect to *work* for our living."

"You seem to be alone to-night," said 'Assaf.

"I have been alone in the house this day,"

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said Faris. "My mother and brother went this morning to visit my aunt at Halazoon. Still," said the giant with another sweet smile, "I am not afraid to stay alone — in the daytime."

His being alone suited our purpose perfectly.

"Smoke, boys," he invited us, pushing the tobacco-plate in our direction. "Roll cigarettes; a good smoke drives away Satan."

We did smoke, and while smoking unfolded to him our marvelous story. It electrified him. "What is there to fear?" was his ominous remark. "Neither angels nor devils can prevent us from *finding* the treasure."

His words were music to our ears; here was a man who did not believe in digging for a treasure on the installment plan.

"Do you know, boys," resumed our host with a deep sigh, "for some time I have had the presentiment that God was going to bring things my way. You know how it is when a thought of this

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kind takes hold of your mind. It has seemed to me for some time that I was going to get rich, but did not know how that was going to come true. I have had in the course of a year two chances which seemed good, but failed. I will tell you about them if you will not tell anybody else."

"By all the Saints!" we exclaimed, "none will know your secret from us."

"Good fellows!" said Faris. "The story, briefly speaking, is this: About a year ago I was approached by a skillful worker in metals to join him in the work of imitating coin. He said he was able to counterfeit money so that it could not be distinguished from real money by the Sultan himself. We figured that in the course of two years we should be rich. He wanted my protection and help in disposing of the coin among the sheep and wheat merchants in the far regions of the East where they don't know much about

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such matters. We made our plans and were about ready to proceed when my partner — oh, what a donkey he was — gave the secret to his mother. You know women, especially when they assemble at the fountain. She could not keep the matter to herself, and her son had to flee to Alexandria before the authorities knew about our scheme.”

“What a crazy fellow that was!” we chimed in.

“The second chance,” continued Faris, “was of a different kind. The adventure was more in my line than was the counterfeiting of money. Habib Faisal — the man who has just gone — and I, were told that a man in the town of Q’atra had a small chest solidly packed with gold coin. The chest was described to us as being of Damascus make — it was made of inlaid apricot wood — and we were told exactly where the man had it in his house. So we agreed to go to

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Q'atra on Easter night. The man, who had only his wife, and no children, would go to the midnight Mass, whereupon we would break into the house and secure the chest. But that plan failed also. The man's wife got very sick at that time, so upon our arrival at Q'atra we found many people at the house, and we came back empty-handed. More than that, while fording the river on our way back, I dropped one of my fine pistols and lost it in the stream. But now I feel that my dream of riches, and your dream, boys, will soon be realized."

The fact that our home traditions stood at variance with Faris's intentions and experiences did not at that critical moment prove strong enough to make us shrink from joining him in the task which was before us. We also shared that deep human instinct of hero-worship, regardless of moral distinctions. We would dig for the treasure together.

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On the night we had chosen to dig for the treasure under the new management, the rain fell in torrents, which seemed to us a providential favor. Upon reaching the vineyard of Saint Elias on our way to the cave, the enigmatic Faris crossed himself, bent his massive frame and kissed the terrace wall. We imitated his pious act. "They help," he said to us in a muffled tone. That was what we always believed.

Upon entering the cave our new accomplice made a quick survey of the spot, by the dim light of a tallow candle, and then in a seemingly abstracted manner removed the heavy cloak in which he was wrapped. I shall never forget that moment. With his high leathern gaiters, short *shirwal* (bloomer-like trousers), a pair of pistols buckled at his waist, a handsome belt-knife held within his girdle, a *yatekan* (short sword with a concave edge) dangling from his shoulder, and

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a felt cap with a small silk turban on his head, Faris towered before us in the ghastly light of that subterranean cavern like a mythical giant. It seemed to me that the *Russed* himself could not be more formidable than Faris. "What could we do with this man," I asked myself, "if we found the treasure and he decided to take the whole of it?" Our very lives were in his hands. He removed the weapons from his person, placed them with the cloak in a corner of the cave, and proposed that we proceed to dig hard-by the smooth rock.

Our exertion on that memorable night in the damp, stuffy atmosphere of the mysterious cave approached suicide. We streamed with perspiration and burned with thirst; we toiled incessantly until past midnight, expecting every moment that the pickaxe would crash through the pot of gold; but all was in vain. Our supply of tallow candles being very limited, we

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did not dare waste much time in resting. When the hope of success seemed all but gone, we decided to take one more turn each at the digging before we abandoned our quest. So I jumped into the deep hole we had already dug, and before I had worked ten minutes the pick-axe brought to the surface several apparently human bones. Surely the treasure was near at hand. Had not the *Mûghreby* told us "when the bones appeared to look confidently for the fortune"?

No sooner did I say "bones!" than Faris jumped into the hole, threw me out, and said, "It is my turn to dig!"

"It is my turn," said 'Assaf timidly.

"Stay where you are," retorted Faris. "I will see to it that each one of us has his share of the gold."

Fearful and helpless, 'Assaf and I instinctively went and sat close by the weapons. Should it

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become necessary we would, in self-defense, try to turn the giant's arms against him.

Faris tore the ground up like a steam shovel, while his eyes searched every new shovelful of dirt with microscopic keenness. Suddenly he stopped, and leaning against the rock gazed interestedly into the hole. "We will dig no more to-night," he murmured, as he threw out the tools; "let us go home."

"Let me work my turn," said 'Assaf.

But for some mysterious reason Faris was determined that we should dig no more on that night, and 'Assaf and I could do nothing but yield to his wishes.

Of course it was not to be expected that our treachery could long be hidden from our former partners. On that very night, when 'Assaf returned home in the small hours and stole into bed in the living-room where all the family slept, his father became suspicious of his behavior.

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When the family arose in the morning, 'Assaf's soiled clothes and the weariness which he could not disguise told the story.

Upon this Abu-Nasif started for the cave in grim silence. What he saw there lashed him into fury. To be so betrayed by his own son was more than he could bear. 'Assaf must confess all, or be cast out of his father's house and surrendered to the authorities.

'Assaf did make a clean breast of it and asked his enraged father's forgiveness. But Abu-Nasif appeared determined to place Faris and me in the hands of the Turkish officials. Badly frightened, I lost no time in seeking Faris and telling him of the impending danger. The desperado's eyes flashed fire as he said, "I will manage Abu-Nasif in a short time."

Later that night Abu-Nasif, responding to a knock, opened his door and found Faris standing outside, armed to the teeth. In a few words and

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in the manner of the men of his class, the giant told Abu-Nasif that if he made the matter known to the authorities, his whole family would be exterminated.

Two days later, encouraged by the temporary peace which Abu-Nasif felt forced to patch up with us, 'Assaf and I visited the cave. In the neighborhood of the spot at which Faris had gazed so interestedly when he had ordered us to cease digging and go home, three days before, we found large pieces of pottery scattered around a small hole where a jar might have been placed. Startled, we sought Faris, but he was nowhere to be found.

Did Faris find the treasure? There was no one who could tell. It was five years later when, through a wheat merchant, I next heard of him. He was then in the fertile region southeast of Damascus, where my informant found him in an opulent state, having supervision of large tracts

HIDDEN TREASURE OF RASMOLA

of land. Whether Faris owned all that land or not, the wheat merchant did not know, but to all appearances he did, for he practiced the hospitality of an Arab emir and spent most lavishly. Not long after that I emigrated to America. But while on a visit to Syria, a few years later, I was very curious to know what had become of my friend Faris, and if possible to penetrate in some way the mystery of the treasure.

Abu-Nasif had long been gathered to his fathers. Faris, I was told, returned to Rasmola, two years before my visit, stricken with a fatal illness. He willed the small house and few mulberry-trees that he had inherited from his father to the convent of Saint Elias. When he felt the great Destroyer approaching, he called for the parish priest, to whom he unburdened his soul in confession, a duty which he had neglected for many years. Those who kept the last vigil around his bed reported that in his delirious wanderings

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just before he breathed his last he twice uttered the name of Abu-Nasif.

Thus went Faris the way of all flesh, and the real secret of the treasure remained known only to him, and possibly to his confessor.



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